

Advancing Novice Nurse Competency and Building Team Culture Through Mentorship: A NICU Initiative

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Background

The Neonatal Intensive Care Unit (NICU) at Sunnybrook Health Sciences Centre has struggled with a nursing shortage due to increased turnover in staffing. Burnout and low morale had increased, and the ratio of novice to experienced nurses had significantly increased. There was a recognized need to foster an environment and a post-pandemic culture in which new nurses could develop and thrive and where more experienced nurses could be encouraged and supported.

Mentorship is an innovative strategy that has been shown to increase the retention of nursing staff and support building capacity within the team (Belanger-Hardy et al., 2023). In October 2022, facing a vacancy rate of 40% and an attrition rate of 32%, the NICU developed and implemented a nursing mentorship initiative.

Aim:

To increase nursing recruitment and retention and enhance overall unit culture through nursing mentorship.

- Goals for the NICU Mentorship Program:**
- Build capacity; improve clinical knowledge and skill of novice nurses
 - Decrease near-misses and errors caused by lack of experience and knowledge
 - Increase recruitment; create a program and a culture that would entice new nurses to apply to the NICU
 - Decrease attrition rate
 - Improve retention; help newly hired nurses feel uplifted and supported and boost overall unit morale

All nurses with less than 3 years of experience are enrolled in a mentorship program led by a team of experienced RNs. By the end of a 3-year mentorship period, nurses will show proficiency in a variety of clinical skills, demonstrate growth in their critical thinking, and be prepared to take on advanced roles such as resuscitation, preceptorship, and team leading.



Method/Processes

Utilizing Benner's (1982) From Novice to Expert framework, the NICU engaged four experienced nurses to work full-time as mentors in October 2022.

- Mentors:**
- Are supernumerary
 - Are available for in-the-moment clinical support and teaching
 - Build trusting relationships through shared experiences that help establish psychological safety, a sense of belonging, and overall well-being
 - Have protected office space for 1:1 conversations with mentees
 - Meet monthly as a group to promote cohesiveness and review progress of mentees
 - Track individual skill development on a continuum from novice to expert
 - Make acuity suggestions for assignment-making based on individual mentee progress

Review and Results

October 2020 – October 2022	October 2022 – October 2024
RNs completed orientation: 47	RNs completed orientation: 50
New RNs retained: 32	New RNs retained: 47
Retention rate: 68%	Retention rate: 94%
Vacancy rate: 40%	Vacancy rate: 7.5%

- Current state:**
- 75 mentees currently enrolled
 - 62% of full-time staff have less than 3 years of experience (up from 47% in 2022)
 - 5th full time mentor added to provide 24/7 coverage (April 2024)
 - 14 nurses graduated from the program

- Mentees report:**
- Increased job satisfaction related to supported professional and personal growth
 - Reduction in anxiety knowing there is mentor support for managing challenging and dynamic clinical situations
 - Appreciating opportunities to debrief and learn from challenges instead of feeling lost or overwhelmed

Mentor-mentee relationships provide a safe place to work through impactful professional experiences together and to share frustrations, concerns, sadness, and triumphs; this benefits overall mental well-being and aids in fostering resilience over time.

Mentorship assists in fostering healthy connections between novice and experienced staff by engaging new staff and supporting their integration into the unit. The mentor group has initiated and facilitated team-building activities that involve the entire unit to help connect experienced, novice, and interdisciplinary staff in a fun and meaningful way.

Experienced NICU nurses have expressed that the mentor role eases their stress and facilitates a more supportive work environment, as they are no longer solely responsible for supporting novice nurses while managing their own assignments.

Regular communication between mentors, educators, and management helps bridge the gap between leadership and the bedside, promoting accountability and collaboration to ensure continued growth and early identification of practice concerns.



Conclusions:

A formalized nursing mentorship initiative in the NICU has positively impacted recruitment, retention, and the unit's culture. The Sunnybrook Mentorship Program has focused on the professional growth of novice nurses and has positively influenced recruitment and retention while increasing the quality of care provided to all patients.



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