Specialist nursing training in Poland: Applications for neuroscience nursing

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Abstract

Background: Nurses have a pivotal role in providing, facilitating, advocating and promoting the best possible care and outcome for the client. To ensure decisions and actions are based on current standards of practice, nurses must be accountable for participation in ongoing education in their area of practice.

Aim: To present a description of the current state of Polish nursing education and specialized model for neurological and neurosurgical nursing that can be utilized for both undergraduate and postgraduate continuing education in Poland.

Data sources: The model of postgraduate training introduced in Poland in 2000 was taken into consideration in developing the framework for neuroscience nursing postgraduate continuing education presented here. The framework for neurological continuing education is also based on a review of the literature and is consistent with Poland’s legally binding professional nursing regulations (normative and implementing regulations).

Conclusion: The model demonstrates the need for the content of pre- and post-undergraduate degree education in neurological nursing to be graduated, based on the frameworks for undergraduate education (acquiring the knowledge and basic skills for performing the work of nurses) and postgraduate education (acquiring knowledge and specialist skills necessary for providing advanced nursing care including medical acts on patients with nervous system diseases).

Implications for nursing: New and advanced skills gained in specialization training can be applied to complex functions, roles and professional tasks undertaken by nurses in relation to care of patients with neurological dysfunctions.

Key words: professional improvement, specialist, neurology and neurosurgery nursing

Introduction

The July 2011 Professions of Nurses and Midwives Act passed by the Polish Parliament states that nurses and midwives are obligated to routinely update their professional knowledge to maintain licensure. The Act also guarantees their right to postgraduate education. This law, combined with the availability of multiple post-graduate courses (e.g., obstetrics, mental health), allows nurses and midwives to enhance their professional practice by expanding their skill levels in specialty areas (e.g., obstetrics, mental health) to ensure competence. Continuing competence is the ongoing ability of a nurse to integrate and apply the knowledge, skills, judgment and personal attributes required to practise safely and ethically in a designated role and setting (Canadian Nurses Association, 2004). Maintaining and improving knowledge and skills in specialized practice contributes to the quality of patient outcomes and to the evidence base for nursing practice (Melnyk & Fineout-Overholt, 2011).
Nursing education in Poland

Consistent with international historical trends, transformation of nursing education in Poland has progressed from high school training courses for nursing assistants (1950s) to programs combining nursing education at the secondary school level in the form of two to two-and-a-half year programs after nine years of general education and identification as nurses (1960s), to undergraduate university degree programs instituted in the 1970s (Sztembis, 2006). Today in Poland, undergraduate education of nurses can also be accomplished as part of what is termed a “higher education system” (mainly a system of combined vocational and university education). To become a nurse, every candidate has to complete an educational program in either a higher vocational school* or a university.

*A higher vocational school is described as an institution that offers licentiate studies. In Poland, these were five-year secondary school nursing programs (1960s) or 2.5-year post-secondary nursing schools (1970s–1980s) or three-year university Bachelor’s programs (1990s).

Degree programs

Both higher vocational school and university programs offer nursing programs. Examples of university-based nursing programs include the Nursing and Health Sciences Faculty Medical University of Lublin, the Department of Health Sciences Collegium Medicum of Nicolas Copernicus University in Bydgoszcz, and the Medical University of Wroclaw. Generally, at the majority of universities in Poland, studies to specialize in nursing are divided into two degrees: a first degree (undergraduate licentiate studies; Bachelor’s Degree) and a second degree (Master’s Degree). After completing the first degree (BN, which is given after successfully passing theoretical and practical exams) the candidates are registered by an appropriate nursing association (e.g., District Association of Nurses and Midwives in Bydgoszcz) and deemed competent to practise.

At present in Poland this registration is valid all over the country. Once a BN is achieved, nurses are eligible to undertake Master’s degree studies. Doctoral (PhD) nursing degree programs are offered at only a few universities, none of which provide a degree specific to nursing. In addition to these postgraduate academic degrees, another option to expand nurses’ knowledge and skills is termed “specialization” training. In Poland there are two “Learned Societies” related to neurological nursing. These include a Nursing Section of Polish Neurosurgeons (established in 2002) and a Polish Society of Neurological Nurses (established in 2010). Efforts are being made to join these two societies into a single Polish Society of Neuroscience Nursing. This would be

**Figure 1: Compatibility of the pre- and post-degree teaching**

Undergraduate training

- Studies I° (Bachelor’s degree)

Postgraduate training

- Studies II° (Master’s degree)
- Studies III° (PhD degree—in a chosen field)

Training

Specialization in neurological nursing

Specialist courses, professional development courses

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the leading nursing association in Poland with its principal task being regulation of qualifications and competence of neurological and neurosurgical nurses. While specialized training in the area of neuroscience nursing does exist in Poland, there is a gap in the knowledge base to support evidence-based practices in this specialty.

The aim of this publication is to present the current state of undergraduate and postgraduate "specialist nursing education" in Poland. Based on existing literature and author experience, a continuing education model is proposed for specialized neurological nursing. The model is consistent with legally binding regulations (normative and implementing regulations) concerning the nursing profession in Poland, specialist literature related to continuing education, and the model of postgraduate training introduced in Poland in 2000.

Postgraduate education and regulatory requirements
The postgraduate education system is regulated by the government in Poland. Undergraduate-level nursing training, often referred to as basic training, is a prerequisite to broadly define postgraduate/continuing education (Wojnowska-Dawiskiba, 1999; 2001a; 2001b; Wojnowska-Dawiskiba et al., 2004; Wrońska et. al., 2001; Słusarz, & Wojnowska-Dawiskiba, 2003; Opracowanie zbiorowe CKPPiP, 2000; Blak-Kaleta, 2001; Tulodziecka, 2001).

In 1998, the Centre for Post-basic Continuing Education of Nurses and Midwives (CPBCEDN) was created as a new unit in the Polish national Ministry of Health and Social Welfare infrastructure (Ordinance of the Health Minister of 29 October, 2003). The CPBCEDN is accountable for coordinating the work of organizing, operationalizing, and monitoring the quality of nurses’ and midwives’ continuing education and specialization programs. As well, regulations concerning nursing postgraduate education were addressed in several legislative acts passed between 2003–2007: a) on nursing and midwifery vocation (Ordinance of 15 July, 2011 on nursing and midwifery vocation); b) on postgraduate education for nurses and midwives (Ordinance of the Health Minister of 29 October, 2003 on postgraduate education for nurses and midwives—Journal of Law No. 197, item 1923); c) specifications of nursing domains and domains that have application in health protection in which a specialization and qualifying courses are taught skills to improve or maintain their competencies and qualifications as community health nurses (Sztymbis, 2006). At present, the new post-basic programs developed in 1998 to 2000 provide many nurses and midwives with improved skills through the completion of 1) two-year specialization training programs, 2) training courses, 3) specialization courses, and 4) upgrading courses (Sztymbis, 2006) and receive either a certificate or diploma.

Nursing specialization
The Ordinance of the Health Minister (2003) specifies basic nursing domains in which a specialization can be carried out. The ordinance also outlines programs for the specialization of nurses and midwives including required courses and the specialization credentials obtained. Based on this ordinance, 22 nursing specialties and qualifying courses for nurses and midwives in Poland have been approved. These range from primary care and occupational health nursing to anesthesiology and intensive care nursing (see Appendix 1 for complete list). Among them is a specialization in neurological nursing ($1.1.$ of the Regulation). In creating a new postgraduate education system for nurses in neurology nursing, programs must be compatible with the existing undergraduate basic education programs and current regulations and legislation (Figure 1). In accordance with program requirements (Ordinance of the Minister of Science and Higher Education, 2007) undergraduate students undertaking specialization classes for neurology and neurological nursing take 75 hours of theoretical classes, 80 hours of practical classes and 80 hours of vocational practice. Taking into account the number of classes for this subject (the total of 235 didactic hours), neurology and neurological nursing is classified as sixth among the core subjects (applies to undergraduate degree studies after 1) nursing basics (485 hours), 2) pediatrics and pediatric nursing (410 hours), 3) basic medical care (395 hours), 4) general nursing (370 hours) and 5) surgery and surgical nursing (370 hours). Regulations require that the format of postgraduate education for specialization include both a theoretical component (210 hours) and an internship (490 clinical practice hours).

Postgraduate education in neurological nursing provides opportunities for nurses to improve their qualifications in different ways depending on the requirements of their practice or interest. Options include enrolment in second degree studies (i.e., a Master’s degree in nursing) or various post-basic (post-BN) certificate courses in neurology nursing.
Neurological nursing

Neurological nursing is currently one of the 22 approved specialty fields of nursing in Poland in which major changes in education and training are being made through post-basic education. At present in Poland, only 51 nurses possess neurological nursing specialization credentials (a register and list of specialists is kept in a Center of Postgraduate Education of Nurses and Midwives in Warsaw). Speciality training in neurological nursing at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels has potential to prepare nursing teams to perform a variety of expanded and advanced nursing practice roles (i.e., expert nurse, clinical specialist, decision-maker, educator, leader, manager). The additional training and education also provides neurological nurses with the advanced knowledge and skills needed to assume broader organizational roles in health promotion education and leadership.

Pre- and post-degree training in neurological nursing

When a nurse graduates from basic degree studies, including the non-university undergraduate stream, (first degree) and has at least two years’ practice experience, they can enter specialty neurological nursing training. Alternatively, they can complete the second degree (Master’s degree), practise for two years and then enter the specialty program. Although differences in the depth and length of study required to achieve specialty credentials previously described differ, the current curricula for neurology and neurological nursing at both post-basic (undergraduate) degree and postgraduate (Master’s) study levels include the following topics:

- etiopathogenesis of neurological disorders
- diagnostic methods used in neurology
- basic life functions disorders—circulation, respiration and mental confusion; their influence on the nervous system
- feeling, movement and muscle tension disorders
- congenital and acquired defects of the nervous system
- vascular diseases of the brain
- brain and spinal cord injuries
- demyelinating neurological disorders
- brain tumours
- muscle and peripheral nervous system diseases
- nursing patients who suffer from nervous system diseases.

Through completion of the above-mentioned curricula, students acquire theory and skills necessary for practising the profession of a nurse and become ready to independently perform the vocational role determined by these nursing functions. After completing the specialty training, the functions performed by the post-basic and Master’s level entry nurses are the same.

A graduate’s (Master’s degree nurse) acquired skills and qualifications result from program content within the scope of neurological nursing for first degree studies and include:

- understanding the etiopathogenesis of neurological disorders
- preparation of neurological patients for diagnostic tests
- care of patients undergoing tests
- assessment of patients’ basic life functions disorders
- application of scales used for assessment of patients’ consciousness level
- care of patients with dysesthesia, dyspraxia and muscle tension disorders
- care of patients with central nervous system disorders
- care of patients with nervous system trauma.

The above-mentioned skills and qualifications are compatible with standards of teaching and professional qualifications framework for nurses in Poland. Certainly, after obtaining specialization (described below), a different range (broader) of skills and qualifications of the candidate are acquired.

Title of specialist

In accordance with the established vocational nomenclature, current specialization training (Art. 66 and 67, Ordinance of 15 July, 2011 on nursing and midwifery vocation, 2011), has been defined as a type of postgraduate training. The purpose of this training is to provide a nurse or midwife with specialist qualifications (as previously described) in a particular nursing domain or in a domain that has application in health protection, and to provide a specialist title in this field.

The specialization training in neurological nursing is realized on the basis of the education program framework, which includes contents and skills put in two blocks:

- General vocational block, which is the same for all specializations in terms of realization time (i.e. 330 hours) and the scope of realized contents
- Specialist block, the purpose of which is to prepare the nurse to provide professional care to patients with nervous system diseases (700 hours: 210 theory hours and 490 practice hours).

In neurological nursing education six modules (see Table 1) are distinguished (Ordinance of Health Minister, 2003; enclosure 17 to the Ordinance). Each of the modules has its own objective, specification of skills (both theoretical and practical) and curriculum.

The objective of module I: acquainting the nurse with pathophysiology, diagnostic of the nervous system diseases, as well as the specifics of nursing and medical care to patients with neurological diseases.

The objective of module II: preparing the nurse to provide professional medical care to people with nervous system diseases under conservative treatment.

The objective of module III: preparing the nurse to provide professional medical care to people with nervous system diseases under surgical treatment.

The objective of module IV: preparing the nurse to provide medical care to children with central nervous system injuries and diseases, as well as to the families of the children in question.

The objective of module VI: preparing the nurse to provide professional care to people with mental disorders and diseases.

Pursuing professionalism in neurological nursing education should also take into account the training hours that are realized through other types of postgraduate education. Worth
mentioning, within the specialist courses and additional training, are other skills incorporated into the specialization such as: 1) urinary bladder training, 2) cardio-pulmonary resuscitation, 3) obtaining and interpreting EKG printouts, 4) wound treatment, and 5) enteral and parenteral nutrition (Ordinance of Health Minister, 2003; Ordinance of the Health Minister, 2007).

Professional training in neurological nursing is concluded by achieving the specialist title. The nurse who has completed the course curriculum (Table I) for specialization in neurological nursing takes an external state exam, which is carried out by an institution that has been appointed by the Minister of Health (e.g., Center of Postgraduate Education of Nurses and Midwives in Warsaw). After the nurses successfully pass the exam and acquire specialist skills confirmed by professional qualifications of a specialist in this domain, they receive a specialist diploma (Ordinance of the Health Minister of 29 October, 2003; Ślusarz et al., 2003).

Conclusion
It can be said that with pre- and post-degree education for nurses in neurological nursing in Poland, training is gradual and builds on prior knowledge and skills. The framework of undergraduate education (acquiring the knowledge and basic skills for basic nursing) and postgraduate education (acquiring knowledge and specialist skills necessary for providing advanced professional nursing care to patients with nervous system diseases) has become more comprehensive. In Poland, the model of professional development within the scope of neurological and neurosurgical nursing (mainly postgraduate training) will require significant changes in validation of nursing practice, licensure and introduction of legal acts pertaining to scope of practice, which are now being discussed.

**Implications for nursing**
Currently, nurses who receive specialty training after achieving their first or second degree are treated as equally well-educated specialists who can perform the same professional tasks. Many graduate nurses and nursing educators believe there should be consecutive stages in nursing education (pre, graduate and postgraduate training) in order to achieve professional competencies and advanced specialization. Continuity of professional improvement should be

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¹In the basic medical care: family nurse vocational training: 35 hours, social worker practice: 35 hours
²Craniocerebral injuries ward or neurosurgery ward in which craniocerebral injuries are treated
³Spinal injuries ward or trauma ward in which spinal injuries are treated
maintained to educate specialists in neurological and neurosurgical nursing. New specialist skills gained in advanced training programs can be applied to functions, roles and professional tasks related to care of patients with neurological dysfunctions.

Offering such an education system may help to produce highly specialized neurological nurses. In accordance with their specialist knowledge and skills, these nurses can individually contract their nursing services (making a range of entitlements broader). Finally, there is an opportunity to appoint a specialist learned society that will gather specialists in neurological nursing who will have a definitive say in establishing regulations concerning their profession.

References

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Ordinance of the Health Minister of 29 October, 2003 on postgraduate education for nurses and midwives (Journal of Law No. 197, item 1923).
Ordinance of the Health Minister of 7 November, 2007 on range and types of preventive, diagnostic, medical and rehabilitation services rendered by nurse independently, without doctor's order, and on range and types of such services rendered by midwife independently (Journal of Law No. 210, item 1540).
Ordinance of the Minister of Science and Higher Education of 12 July, 2007 on specification of education standards for the particular fields of study and education levels (Journal of Law No. 164, item 1166), enclosure no. 80. Teaching standards for the field of study—nursing.

Appendix 1: List of nursing specialties (Ordinance of Health Minister, of 29 October, 2003, on specification of nursing domains and domains that have application in health protection, in which a specialization and qualifying courses for nurses and midwives can be carried out)

Nurses can specialize in 22 nursing specialties:
1. family nursing
2. occupational health nursing
3. teaching/school environment nursing
4. preventive nursing
5. geriatric nursing
6. cardiac nursing
7. nephrology nursing
8. diabetes nursing
9. pediatric nursing
10. surgical nursing
11. operating room nursing
12. anesthesiology and ICU nursing
13. oncology nursing
14. psychiatric nursing
15. long-term care nursing
16. neurological nursing
17. palliative care nursing
18. emergency care nursing
19. health promotion and health education
20. neonatal nursing
21. epidemiology nursing
22. management in health care institutions

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