

New Graduate Nurses' Experiences With and Perceptions of Their Mental Health and Well-being During the COVID-19 Pandemic: An Interpretive Descriptive Study

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



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Executive Summary

This is the executive summary report of an interpretive description study of new graduate nurses' experiences with and perceptions of their mental health and well-being as they transitioned to practice during the COVID-19 pandemic in Newfoundland and Labrador. This study was conducted between Oct 2022 and March 2024 by the Faculty of Nursing and in collaboration with the Office of Professional Educational Development (OPED), Faculty of Medicine at Memorial University of Newfoundland. Funding to complete this project was received from The Workplace Health, Safety and Compensation Commission (WorkplaceNL).

Research Question and Objectives:

The overarching question that guided this research project was:

How do new graduate nurses' experience and perceive their mental health and well-being as they transition to practice during the COVID-19 pandemic in Newfoundland and Labrador (NL)?

The research objectives were as follows:

1. To describe new graduate nurses' experiences and perceptions of their mental health and well-being as they transitioned to practice during the COVID-19 pandemic.
2. To describe new graduate nurses' awareness and use of supportive resources during the COVID-19 pandemic.
3. To identify strategies and resources to support new graduate nurses' mental health and well-being as they transition to practice and during a public health crisis.

The following methods were used to collect information and data in this study from Oct 2022 and Dec 2023:

- A literature review, and
- Semi-structured interviews were conducted with new graduate nurses¹.

Background and Key Findings

The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted life around the world and resulted in significant concerns for the physical and mental well-being of those responsible for providing care. Workers experiencing mental health challenges in the workplace can have a negative impact on absenteeism, attrition, and patient safety (Badu et al., 2020; Cavanagh et al., 2020; Cimiotti et al., 2012; Huhtala et al., 2021).

Health care professionals such as Registered Nurses (RNs) found they experienced feelings of loss, a lack of socialization, fear of becoming infected or infecting others, and the need to constantly adapt (Garcia-

¹ Registered nurses who have graduated from an accredited nursing program and are in their first two years of nursing practice.

Martin et al., 2020; Kang et al., 2020). New graduate nurses (NGNs) were particularly vulnerable given the additional pressures of the COVID-19 pandemic as they transitioned to their first years of practice (Duchscher, 2008; Dyess & Sherman, 2009; Kramer, 1974). NGNs played an important role during the COVID-19 pandemic and were often called upon to fill critical gaps in staffing. An understanding of the mental health and well-being of NGNs during a time of public health crisis is needed to ensure appropriate supports are in place to support and protect novice nurses entering the health care workforce.

Findings from the literature review completed as part of this study indicate NGNs experienced unique stressors as they transitioned to practice during the COVID-19 pandemic. The mandatory cessation or switch to simulated clinical experiences left NGNs feeling unprepared and unconfident as they lacked hands-on experience and had little experience with infectious disease or caring for the critically ill and dying (Bultas & L'Ecuyer, 2022; Glover et al., 2022; Kaisla, 2022; Sherman & Labat, 2021). Amplifying these stressors was a lack of adequate orientation or mentorship and insufficient staffing (Kaisla, 2022). NGNs struggled to adapt to new roles, heavy workloads, constantly changing COVID-19 protocols, the use of personal protective equipment, and the cumulative impact of the aforementioned struggles on patient care (Blanco et al., 2023; Kaisla, 2022). As a result, many NGNs were described to be overwhelmed, stressed, anxious and fearful about harming patients or infecting friends and family members (Carnesten et al., 2021; Kovanci & Ozbas, 2021; McMillian et al., 2023; Savin, 2021). Coping strategies employed by NGNs ranged from self-care, including setting boundaries and personal reflection (McMillian et al., 2023) to overeating and drinking (Kaisla, 2022; Savin, 2021; Sessions et al., 2021).

Noted recommendations in the literature to reduce the general stressors experienced by NGNs were directed to educational institutions, healthcare organizations and NGNS. Recommendations aimed at educational institutions included planning for the professional transition of students and adding course content focused on pandemic training, caring for the critically ill, and psychological wellness (Bani, et al., 2022; Schivinski & McNulty, 2021; Suplee et al., 2022). Organizational recommendations included ensuring strong nursing leadership, positive learning environments, and adequate orientation and mentorship with ongoing transition monitoring to support NGNs during times of crisis (Fernandez-Basanta et al., 2022). Nurse residency and transition to practice programs were also recommended for organizations hiring NGNs as they were noted to help ameliorate the transition to practice experience (Broussard, 2023; Grubaugh et al., 2023; Gallagher & Kopp, 2022).

Although there were many recommended approaches to reduce the general transition stressors experienced by NGNs, there were fewer offered to support their mental health and well-being. Suggested approaches included hiring organizations to provide stress management training, resiliency training or journaling, counselling services, and the creation of trauma informed wellness programs; however, several of these supports were offered to both NGNs and experienced RNs and not specifically tailored to the NGN experience (Casella, et al., 2023; Naylor et al., 2021). They also required additional work, time or engagement of the NGN which could be perceived as an additional stressor. Findings

indicate initiatives specifically targeting NGNs and their psychological well-being without adding to their workload are needed (Schivinski & McNulty, 2021).

The analysis of data collected from interviews conducted as part of this study highlighted four main themes, as well as recommendations for supports and resources. The four main themes included: "That's all I knew", Stressors and Supports, A Balancing Act, and The Lingering Effects of COVID-19.

"That's all I Knew". NGNs described an inability to compare themselves and their transition experience with other cohorts of NGNs, as the circumstances surrounding their transition were perceived to be unique. Never having the experience of working as an RN outside of the COVID-19 pandemic was described as both a benefit and a hindrance, as they felt they did not have as big of an adjustment to make in terms of their practice as compared with their more experienced colleagues. However, they were not able to experience what they perceived to be the 'normal' transition to practice experience of a NGN and that came with a sense of loss.

Stressors and Supports. NGNs described the stressors they encountered which included, but were not limited to, mandated overtime, continuously changing policies and procedures, and the fear of becoming infected or infecting others. NGNs expressed limited knowledge of organizational supports and relied on existing external supports and self-care routines to support their well-being.

A Balancing Act. Balancing the pressures experienced at work with the need for self-care was an ongoing challenge for NGNs. NGNs described mental health supports both at work and in their personal realm that ebbed and flowed in terms of availability due to external mandates or staffing pressures. For example, those who worked out at the gym to manage their stress were unable to do so during periods of lockdown. Similarly, when gaps in staffing increased with rates of infection, peer supports that were normally available to them were no longer present.

The Lingering Effects of COVID-19. NGNs shared what they have perceived as the lasting effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. For example, the stressors and subsequent emotional and psychological impact on NGNs in this study resulted in some leaving their position or the profession entirely. Others found their pandemic experiences to be motivating and resulted in a desire to enter graduate studies to enable them to increase their scope and ability to provide care.

There were several commonalities noted between the findings and recommendations in the literature and those resulting from the interviews. Similar to the literature, recommendations were aimed at the academic institutions preparing NGNs for practice, the organizations hiring NGNs into their first nursing positions, as well as the NGNs themselves. These included suggestions such as pandemic preparation at the undergraduate level and continuation of clinical experiences, continuation of in-person orientation and mentorship programs upon hire, and self-care practices for NGNs. Unique recommendations resulting from the analysis of the data collected from the interview were the suggestion for academic institutions to reassure students of the quality of their education during times of major shifts in processes, and for academic and organizations hiring NGNs to maintain open dialogue regarding changes in usual practice to ensure any gaps in clinical experience is shared to support NGNs safe

transition to practice. Additionally, alterations to existing processes and supports such as debriefings, mentorship, and psychological services were recommended.

Findings from this study indicate resources tailored to the NGN experience are required at multiple levels to support the mental health and well-being of new registered nurses entering the healthcare workforce during a public health crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

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