

INTERNSHIP OF ADVANCED PRACTICE NURSES-STUDENTS IN UNEXPLORED AREAS: A PROCESS OF SEARCHING AND ADAPTING

.Background

Integration of advanced practice nurses (APNs) in health care is increasing, also in Belgium. Today, APNs are mainly integrated into hospital settings, however, there is a need and potential for implementation of this role in other healthcare settings as well. The increasing attention on APN also impacted on the development of educational programs for APNs in Flanders. Since the academic year 2020-2021, four universities in Flanders organize an academic master of nursing science with a major in APN, including an internship in clinical practice areas. APN-students are regularly imbedded within settings or organizations that are not yet familiar with the integration of APNs (e.g., long term care settings, primary care). Exploring experiences of APN-students and their supervisors in these organizations can be of added value in revising and optimizing the APN-internship.

Aim(s)

To gain insights into the experiences of APN students and their supervisors on the integration of APN-students into organizations not yet familiar nor experienced with such APN-functions.

Methods

An exploratory qualitative study, using semi-structured interviews, was performed. Six supervisors from 14 healthcare organizations in Flanders, and 12 APN-students from three universities were interviewed. The interviews were audio-taped and transcribed verbatim. A thematic analysis with researcher triangulation was performed.

Results

In general, the internship was considered as a positive experience for all participants. APN-students and their supervisors described the expectations and aims about the internship as divers and initially rather vague. It appeared to be a process of searching and adapting both expectations and learning objectives along the course of the internship. Factors such as gaining autonomy, ensuring flexibility with regard to the aims of the internship and influential key figures facilitated the integration of APN-students. The fragmented period of the internship, a lack of communication, but also role ambiguity and role unclarity were perceived as barriers. The internship facilitated the initiation of future ideas for sustainable integration of APNs within the organization.

Discussion

Our findings indicated that a qualitative and meaningful internship in organizations not familiar with APN-functions was possible. This study provided insights to improve future internships for APN-students. All researchers were intensively involved in APN-students master programs which might potentially have impacted on social desirability. However, no indication for too positive results from the participants perspective was available.

Implications and future perspectives

Our findings underpin the importance of clarifying what can be expected from APN-students before the start of an internship. It is essential that universities monitor the process, interact regularly with supervisors and APN-students and are flexible in adapting learning objectives during the internship. It is promising and very hopeful that APN-students' internship can be a catalyst for initiating APN functions in unexplored areas like long-term care settings in which APN integration in the future is urgently needed.