SKILLS OF RURAL NURSE PRACTITIONERS: IMPLICATIONS FOR EDUCATION FROM A TASK ANALYSIS SURVEY

Authors: Gary Laustsen

Purpose: To present results from a survey that examined rural nurse practitioner (NP) demographics and aspects of the clinical skills and procedures (CSP) used in primary care practice. Implications of the study’s findings will be correlated to NP education.

Background: NPs in primary care perform CSPs for diagnostic and/or therapeutic purposes while providing care for patients with chronic and acute conditions. The role and expectations for NP practice is expanding internationally, especially in rural areas experiencing a decreased availability of physicians. In order to develop evidence-based providers, educators should seek to develop evidence-based student outcomes derived from relevant and current research.

Methods: The study utilized a descriptive correlational survey methodology. The survey instrument was designed by the author, distributed to a convenience sample of NPs (N=1450) in a Northwestern state in the United States (US), and collected via returned mail. Inclusion criteria specified licensing as a primary care nurse practitioner (FNP, ANP, GNP, or PNP). Specialty NPs or other advanced practice registered nurses were excluded. Survey data were entered into a statistical software program for analyses. The survey instrument was reviewed for accuracy and completeness by expert rural NPs before distribution, however reliability and validity of the instrument has not been confirmed. Questions on the survey asked respondents if they performed each CSP (90 in total), the frequency of each CSP use, and importance or criticality of the CSP within the NP’s practice. Respondents were also asked to identify if each CSP was initially learned during their educational program, on-the-job training, or through continuing education. Respondents were also asked questions related to demographic, geographic, and practice-related aspects of their employment. Data were analyzed predominantly with descriptive statistics.

Results: Returned surveys (452 of 1450[31%]) included 70% FNP, 18% ANP, 4% GNP, 11% PNP and 90% had a Master’s degree or higher. Rural or frontier NPs comprised 31% of the respondents. Tabular results related to queried aspects of the major CSPs used by rural NPs will be presented. Findings indicate rural NPs, as compared to urban NPs, utilize a greater number of CSPs, view more CSPs as critical to their practice, and face challenges of providing patient care with available physician colleagues located at greater distances. The majority of NPs did not report learning the CSP in their NP educational programs. Many CSP are identified as critical for practice even if used infrequently.

Implications: NPs anticipating practice in rural or frontier locations have different skill needs than their urban counterparts. Examining the frequency of use and criticality of CSPs utilized in rural NP practice are important considerations for rural health care facilities, NP providers, and NP educators. For improving the quality of health care in rural locations, innovative NP educational programs should offer didactic content and skills training congruent with the current clinical needs of their students and communities. This study secondarily seeks to better inform the practice, education, reimbursement, licensure, and certification aspects of advanced practice registered nurses.

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