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Rene Michal 75 points

President's message	2
Editorial	4
News roundup	6
Articles	-
ACORN Conference Keynote Address 2004 <i>The future is now - live it!</i>	9
ACORN Conference Judith Cornell Oration <i>Reflections on a change in lifestyle</i>	12
Online education: a flexible way to learn	18
Reflection: an insight into nursing practice using the ACORN Competency Standards	22

Conference reports

ACORN National Conference 28 April - 1 May 2004, Adelaide, SA	26
ACORN National Conference 28 April - 1 May 2004, Adelaide, SA	28
National Association of Theatre Nurses (NATN) conference October 2003, Harrogate, UK	30

Reviews 34

Clinical corner 36

Coming events 38

State and Territory news 41

ACORN news 53

Cover

The recovery room at Royal North Shore Hospital, NSW.



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Online education: a flexible way to learn

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Perioperative nurses work in an environment of continual rapid advances in health care and related technology. To provide the necessary care to patients undergoing anaesthesia and surgery, perioperative nurses need specialised knowledge and skills. One way to provide this education is in the form of postgraduate studies. However, accessing this education can be problematic due to workplace obstacles. Consequently, perioperative nurses seeking postgraduate education require a flexible learning environment, such as that provided by online education. The purpose of this paper is to provide a brief discussion on distance education offered through online learning and to give insight into how this approach can meet the educational needs of perioperative nurses.

The need for postgraduate perioperative education

Perioperative nursing has developed considerably in the past 20 years from a limited function where tasks were allocated to the 'scrub' and 'scout' nurse, to the now highly specialised role of the perioperative nurse. Today's perioperative nurse cares for the patient pre, intra and postoperatively. Fulfilling this role requires nurses to possess a wide multi-disciplinary knowledge base and a diverse range of interpersonal skills. Furthermore, in this era of health care specialisation, perioperative nurses need to be equipped with advanced clinical and technical knowledge. There is also an expanding diversity in the locations in which perioperative nurses work. Traditionally, surgery occurred within the operating suite and, for the most part, still does. However, in recent years, surgical and anaesthetic procedures have increasingly taken place in other settings. These include day surgeries and other hospital departments such as radiology and angiography. Working in different environments subsequently requires the accomplishment of further specialised skills and knowledge.

The perioperative nursing world is only a microcosm within the

professionals are now taking notice of and scrutinising provided by perioperative nurses. The public expects the standard of health care, part of which is best provided by nurses. Moreover, perioperative nurses have a legal responsibility to ensure that they have the necessary knowledge and skills to provide this high standard of care.

The care provided by perioperative nurses must be carried out in a manner that meets the *Australian College of Operating Room Nurses (ACORN) Standards for Perioperative Nursing*, including *Nursing Guidelines, Position Statements and Competency Standards*. These documents are recognised national standards increasingly being cited as the basis of best practice in perioperative settings¹. Education for perioperative nurses also provides a professional development pathway within the specialty. For a commitment to life long learning through education is important to continue to develop the perioperative nursing specialty.

One way to provide education is in the form of postgraduate studies in perioperative nursing. These courses may be in the form of a Graduate Certificate, a Graduate Diploma or other level qualifications. Perioperative postgraduate courses are offered in diverse formats, by a variety of educational institutions and settings. Some require regular face-to-face attendance at classes and tutorials and others are fully distance or external in nature.

Flexibility is an important feature of any education offered to perioperative nurses and postgraduate education is no exception. Consider how difficult it is for perioperative nurses to meet educational requirements that require regular attendance at classes. The glaring reality of the demands of the clinical environment can present major obstacles. These include perioperative nurses working rotating shifts and completing double shifts in a hospital where there may be unanticipated emergency surgery. Furthermore, many nurses must balance family and social commitments with their professional responsibilities and furthering their education.

Clearly, education offered in a flexible format is more likely to accommodate the postgraduate educational needs of perioperative nurses. For a programme to be effective, it must be readily accessible and available whenever the workload permits. Many educational institutions now recognise the importance of offering flexible learning. This is essential to achieve a realistic vision for developing graduates as lifelong learners. Moreover, it is necessary to provide a more learner-centred environment that focuses on meeting the needs of diverse populations such as perioperative nurses.

Flexible learning

Flexible learning is a broad term used to describe learning that provides students with choice as to when, where and how they engage with learning resources. Activities typically employ real-world based educational models, which often involve the use of informal



Online learning can make many promises, but it takes commitment and resources, and it must be done right⁸. 'Doing it right' means that online learning materials should be designed with the learners and learning in focus, and that adequate support is provided. Educational and technological support is essential with online learning to ensure that students gain confidence in the approach and use it as a road of discovery and challenge as opposed to a hindrance. To further maximise this approach, Ring & Mathieu⁹ suggest that it must reflect high authenticity. When applied to perioperative nursing, this means that those using online learning must be able to relate the knowledge to their workplace. This can be done by ensuring high interactivity and collaboration with the learner. For example, chat lines and online discussion rooms can be used to discuss relevant issues and students can provide their input to enhance the programme.

The benefits of online learning

Today, educational institutions are moving more and more toward the use of the Internet to deliver education, both on campus and via the distance mode. Interestingly, some organisations are also adopting online learning as the main delivery method to train employees through inservice education and orientation programmes¹⁰. However, for more organisations and institutions to make this move, there must be a perception that using online learning provides major benefits. For learners, the benefits include:

- Online learning has no time zones or set locations.
- Distance is not an issue.
- Learners can access the online materials at anytime.
- There can be real time interaction between learners and educators. Learners are made aware in advance of when this interaction will occur to ensure that the allocated time is suitable.
- Learners can communicate with experts in the field in which they are studying.
- Learners can complete online courses while working on the job or in their own space, and can contextualise the learning.

Online learners can be provided with a variety of learning activities, such as reading textual materials, listening to audio content or viewing visuals or video materials. Learners can conduct research on the Internet and link to online information, libraries and government departments, both nationally and internationally to acquire further information. Practice activities with feedback can also be included to allow learners to monitor how they are performing. This will allow them to adjust their learning method if necessary.

For the educator, tutoring can be done at anytime and from anywhere. Online materials can be updated, and learners are able to see the changes at once. When learners are able to access materials on the Internet, it is easier for the educator to direct them to appropriate materials and information based on their needs. If designed properly, online learning systems can be used to determine learners' needs and current level of expertise, and to assign appropriate materials to achieve the desired learning outcomes⁶.

Never in the history of life on our planet has the need for informed and wisdom-filled action been greater than it is today. As the learning environment becomes a global community, the cognitive sciences are merging with computing and telecommunications to form what distance educators refer to as "knowledge media"¹¹. It is recognised that these trends can provide more equitable access to higher

education, and hence more social equity, as campus-bound and distance-education paradigms merge and complement each other.

There is presently an ongoing discussion about new terminology that should replace 'distance education', but at the same time be more inclusive than 'online education'. Terms such as 'distributed learning', 'technology mediated learning' and 'telematics' are already used in North America. Elsewhere, other terms are being used, such as 'resource based learning' and 'flexible learning'¹². Whatever we call it, online learning focuses on the learner as an individual within a community of learning such as the perioperative nursing specialty. Consequently, this approach provides an educational framework which can achieve the goal of delivering the best current theory and practice necessary for perioperative nurses to perform their role.

Conclusion

In order to survive the transition from the industrial age to the age of information, perioperative educators need to appreciate the importance of online learning. Online learning may be seen as a threat to traditional delivery methods. On the other hand, it can provide new opportunities for teaching and learning. Whether through higher education or in-service continuing education programmes, online programmes should mobilise recent theory and research. They should also enhance learning by enabling the identified characteristics necessary for an effective learning environment and ensuring that it is present and accessible¹³.

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- Flexible access to learning resources.
- Flexible admission pathways and recognition of prior learning.
- Flexible delivery of learning experiences and assessment.
- Traditional print-based distance education.
- Online learning².

Flexible learning in the form of distance education practice and theory has evolved through five generations over the past 150 years³. The last half of the 20th century witnessed rapid developments and the emergence of three new generations: one supported by the mass media of television and radio; another by the synchronous tools of video and audio conferencing; and yet another based on computer conferencing. The first part of the 21st century produced visions of another generation who would rely on data-based assisted learning. This is referred to by a number of terms including webucation, eLearning, or online learning. Throughout this paper, online learning will be used to encompass all of these terms.

Online learning implies that the learner is at a distance from the tutor or educator; uses some form of technology to access the learning materials; uses technology to interact with the tutor or educator and other learners; and is provided with some form of support³. There are many definitions of online learning in the literature such as "educational material that is presented on a computer"⁴ and "an innovative approach for delivering instruction to a remote audience using the web as the medium"⁵.

However, online learning should focus on more than just the presentation or delivery of the educational material. The learner and

the learning process should actually be the aim of online learning. A more student-centred definition is provided by Ally⁶, who suggests that online learning is "the use of the Internet to access learning materials, to interact with the content, the educator and other learners; and to obtain support during the learning process, in order to acquire knowledge, to construct personal meaning, and to grow from the learning experience". Online learning is ideal for perioperative nurses as it allows for flexibility of access, from anywhere and at anytime. This allows participants to collapse time and space to meet their needs⁷. Apart from understanding the learners' circumstances, the online materials should also be designed to engage the learner and promote learning.

Some nurses shy away from learning that involves computers or the web as they see it as difficult or foreign. To overcome this obstacle, and promote engagement with materials on the web, online learning must offer user-friendly and challenging activities. These should enable even the most novice of online learners to link new information to old, acquire meaningful knowledge, and use their metacognitive, or higher thinking, abilities. As with any education provided, it is the instructional strategy and *not the technology* that influences the quality of learning. As a result, online learning should be presented in a way that makes it approachable for all nurses.

The main goal of online learning is to promote quality learning. Learning strategies should be selected by educators to motivate learners, facilitate deep processing, build the whole person, cater for individual differences, promote meaningful learning, encourage interaction, provide feedback, facilitate contextual learning and provide support during the learning process.

Do you want to ensure that you have current knowledge and skills to be an effective perioperative nurse?

Are you having trouble accessing University-based educational programs whilst doing triple shifts or rotating shift practices?

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