

Challenges Faced by Nursing Interns during Clinical Practice: A Scoping Review

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Abstract

Background:

Nursing internships serve as a crucial transition from theoretical learning to clinical practice, helping interns develop essential skills and professional growth. However, nursing interns often face several challenges that can negatively impact their learning experience. These include overwhelming workloads, emotional distress, communication barriers, and insufficient mentorship. Addressing these issues is essential for enhancing their experience and preparing them for complex healthcare environments.

Methodology:

A scoping review was conducted to identify and synthesize the challenges faced by nursing interns during their clinical practice. A systematic search of databases such as PubMed, CINAHL, Scopus, and Google Scholar was carried out using keywords like "nursing interns," "clinical practice," and "challenges." Articles were selected

based on predetermined inclusion and exclusion criteria, and the review process was

documented through a PRISMA flowchart to ensure transparency. Ultimately, 40 articles were included in the review.

Results:

Key themes identified from literature include overwhelming workloads, emotional stress, communication barriers, lack of mentorship, and challenges in organizational culture. These themes highlight the complexity of transitioning from academic settings to clinical environments. The studies reviewed emphasize that these challenges negatively affect interns' confidence, performance, and mental well-being.

Conclusion:

Nursing interns encounter various challenges during their clinical practice that impact both their professional development and emotional health. Addressing these challenges requires a holistic approach that includes improved mentorship, supportive organizational culture, enhanced communication skills training, and better workload management. Future research should focus on developing and evaluating interventions that provide necessary support to nursing interns during their transition to professional practice.

Background

Nursing internships represent a pivotal stage in the educational journey of nursing students, functioning as the bridge between theoretical knowledge acquired in classrooms and the practical demands of real-world healthcare settings. This transition is vital for the development of essential clinical skills, critical thinking, and professional growth. However, they often come across numerous challenges that can significantly hinder interns' learning experiences and affect their overall well-being (Labrague, McEnroe-Petite, Leocadio, Van Bogaert, & Cummings, 2017). Among the most reported challenges are overwhelming workloads, emotional distress, communication barriers, and inadequate mentorship. Addressing these issues is crucial for creating a supportive learning environment that prepares interns for the complex realities of the healthcare sector (Sonnentag & Fritz, 2015).

One of the foremost challenges nursing interns' encounters is the excessive workload. Interns are frequently placed in high-pressure clinical settings, where they are expected to juggle multiple roles and responsibilities, including patient care, documentation, and coordination with healthcare teams (Dyrbye, Shanafelt, & Satele, 2018). Galletta, Timmins, & Piredda (2020) underscore that these heavy workloads can result in heightened stress and burnout, negatively impacting interns' mental health and, ultimately, their clinical performance. The fast-paced nature of healthcare settings demands that interns rapidly adapt to new environments, which leads to feelings of inadequacy and discouragement.

Emotional strain is another significant issue nursing interns face. In their roles, they are often exposed to emotionally charged situations, such as caring for critically ill patients, witnessing trauma, or dealing with end-of-life care scenarios. These experiences can induce anxiety, depression, and emotional exhaustion (Rogers, Herring, & McGarry, 2021). The emotional toll of managing patients in distress, coupled with the need to maintain a professional demeanor, often creates internal conflicts, making it difficult for interns to balance their personal emotions with their professional responsibilities (Safan & Ebrahim, 2018).

Communication barriers present another major hurdle for nursing interns. Effective communication is a cornerstone of nursing practice, but many interns struggle with this aspect, particularly in hierarchical healthcare environments. Fear of authority figures, lack of confidence, and uncertainty about appropriate communication protocols can prevent interns from effectively interacting with patients, families, and interdisciplinary teams. Poor communication can lead to misunderstandings and errors in patient care, emphasizing the need for enhanced communication training within nursing programs (Wong, Cummings, & Ducharme, 2020).

A further complicating factor is the difficulty in translating theoretical knowledge into practical skills. Despite the foundational knowledge provided by nursing education programs, many interns experience challenges when applying these skills in real-world settings. Self-doubt, lack of experience, can severely hinder an intern's ability to perform at their best (Baker, Smith, & Jones, 2022). Moreover, inadequate mentorship exacerbates the difficulties faced by nursing interns. Unfortunately, many interns report receiving insufficient support from their mentors, who are often too busy to provide the necessary guidance. This lack of mentorship leaves interns feeling isolated and unsupported, contributing to confusion and frustration in their roles (Tack, Van der Veen, & Dehertogh, 2019).

The organizational culture within healthcare institutions plays a crucial role in shaping the experiences of nursing interns. A supportive and collaborative environment encourages open communication and effective mentorship, which are essential for the personal and professional development of new nurses. Positive organizational cultures contribute to increased confidence and competence, while unsupportive cultures often lead to decreased engagement, higher stress levels, and lower job satisfaction (Hurst, Ritchie, & McDonald, 2020). Moreover, a culture that prioritizes psychological safety allows interns to express concerns and seek assistance without fear of negative consequences, which is critical for both their learning and patient safety (Núñez, Parra, & Becerra, 2021).

The objective of this scope review is to comprehensively identify the challenges faced by nursing interns during their clinical practice experiences. By systematically reviewing the literature, the goal is to synthesize the key challenges and factors that influence nursing interns' experiences, ultimately providing insights that can inform future interventions to support their transition from academia to professional practice.

Methodology

This scoping review follows the five-stage framework developed by Arksey and O'Malley, which includes identifying the research question, identifying relevant studies, study selection, charting the data, and summarizing the results. This approach allows for a comprehensive examination of the challenges nursing interns face during their clinical practice by systematically mapping the literature.

The objective of this scoping review was to identify and synthesize the challenges faced by nursing interns during clinical practice. A rigorous and structured approach in line with Arksey and O'Malley's framework was employed. The research question guiding this review was: *What are the key challenges experienced by nursing interns during their clinical practice?*

A broad exploratory study scope was adopted to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the challenges reported in the literature. The review included studies focusing on nursing interns' experiences and challenges within clinical settings across various geographic locations and healthcare environments.

Search Strategy

A systematic search of the literature was conducted across multiple databases, including PubMed, CINAHL, Scopus, and Google Scholar. The search strategy was designed to capture all relevant studies published up to the present. Keywords such as "nursing interns," "clinical practice," "challenges," "mentorship," and "emotional distress" were used, combined with Boolean operators to refine the search and capture a broad range of studies.

To ensure the inclusion of a comprehensive set of articles, we applied no restrictions based on the publication date. However, only studies published in English were considered. The reference lists of relevant articles were also hand-searched to identify additional sources that may not have been captured in the initial database search.

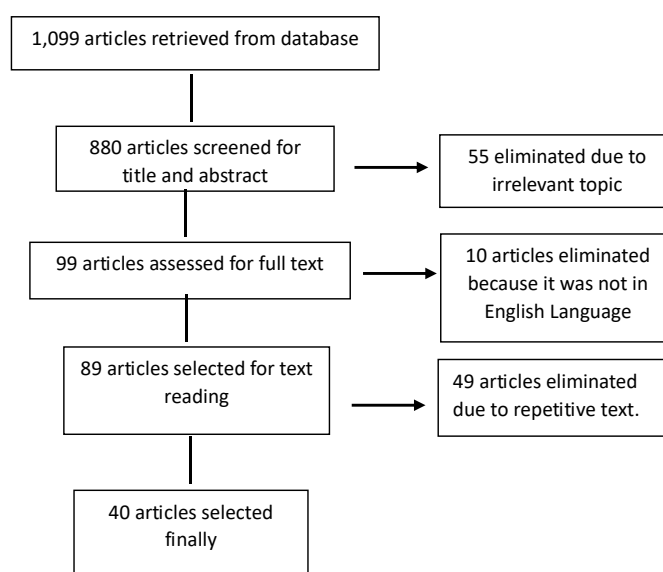
Data Screening

The screening process was conducted in two stages. Initially, duplicates were

removed using reference management software. The remaining titles and abstracts were then independently reviewed by two researchers, with inclusion and exclusion criteria applied to determine study relevance. The inclusion criteria focused on studies that specifically addressed the experiences and challenges faced by nursing interns during their clinical practice, regardless of the clinical setting. Studies focusing on other healthcare professionals, interventions unrelated to nursing internships, or populations outside nursing were excluded.

After the title and abstract screening, full-text articles of potentially relevant studies were retrieved and reviewed for eligibility by the same two researchers. Discrepancies between reviewers were resolved through discussion or, where necessary, by involving a third reviewer. The study selection process was documented using a Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) flowchart (fig:1) to ensure transparency and reproducibility. Ultimately, 40 articles met the inclusion criteria and were included in this scoping review.

Fig 1: PRISMA Chart



Results

In the initial database search, 1,099 articles were retrieved for consideration. After screening the titles and abstracts of 880 articles, 55 were eliminated due to irrelevant topics, leaving 99 articles for full-text assessment. During this phase, 10 articles were excluded because of other language than English. This left 89 articles for a detailed text review. Following this stage, 49 articles were eliminated due to containing repetitive content. Ultimately, 40 articles were selected for scoping review, based on the predefined inclusion criteria.

The key themes related to the challenges experienced by nursing interns were identified. These themes were categorized based on the synthesized findings from the reviewed literature. These themes include overwhelming workloads, emotional stress, organization environment, communication barrier and lack of mentorship.

• Mentorship and Support

To review the theme “nursing interns’ mentorship” nine studies were selected from database. The mentorship in nursing plays a vital role in bridging the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical application. It facilitates skill development, enhances clinical reasoning, and fosters professional growth (McCarthy & Tracey, 2022). Effective mentorship can lead to improved confidence and performance among nursing interns (Patel & Henson, 2023).

Research indicates that nursing interns with inadequate mentorship often experience decreased confidence in their clinical skills. A study Smith, Doe & Johnson (2020) found that interns reported feeling uncertain about their abilities when they

lacked guidance from experienced nurses. This lack of confidence can lead to poor decision-making and increased anxiety during clinical practice. Johnson and Lee (2023) explored that interns without supportive mentors tend to be less engaged in their clinical placements, which can limit their exposure to diverse clinical scenarios and hinder their ability to develop critical thinking skills.

The absence of mentorship also contributes to emotional and psychological stress among nursing interns which impact their professional life. Nguyen, Chen & Garcia, (2022) found that interns who felt unsupported reported higher levels of anxiety and burnout. This emotional strain not only affects their learning but can also impact on the quality of care they provide to patients. The implications of inadequate mentorship extend beyond the interns themselves; they can also affect patient care. Research by Baker & Green (2023), highlighted that nursing interns lacking mentorship may demonstrate lower competency levels, leading to potential safety concerns and compromised patient outcomes.

- **Organizational Culture**

Five studies were selected to review this theme. The organizational culture of the healthcare facility is important factor for professional development interns. A positive organizational culture promotes collaboration, respect, and open communication among healthcare team members. Interns working in such environments are more likely to feel valued and empowered, which enhances their learning experiences and encourages active participation in patient care. Moreover, exposure to diverse clinical settings and patient populations allows interns to develop a more comprehensive understanding of healthcare delivery (Jones & Smith, 2022).

According to McCormack, McCarthy, & Clark, (2016), intern satisfaction and engagement are higher in organizations that prioritize a supportive atmosphere. In contrast, a negative culture characterized by poor communication and complex hierarchical structures can hinder learning and contribute to burnout. A systematic review by Labrague et al. (2017) highlighted that organizational culture directly impacts interns' motivation, performance, and total well-being.

- **Transitioning from Theory to Practice**

The six studies were selected which talk about role confusion because of incongruity between theoretical knowledge and hospital environment. The transition from theoretical knowledge gained in classrooms to practical application in clinical settings poses a substantial challenge for nursing interns. Ahmed, Khan & Ali (2023), emphasized that many interns struggle to connect their academic learning with real-life clinical situations. This disconnect can lead to feelings of confusion and inadequacy, making it difficult for interns to perform confidently in their roles. They usually face “reality shock” because of mismatch of educational values which cultivated during nursing education and the values of clinical environment of hospital.

Kim (2020) defines the term “reality shock” as it is a gap between theory and practice which effect nurse’s professional self-concept. Furthermore, the concept of transition shock has highlighted stress, anxiety, insecurity and felling of incompetence during role transition from newly graduate nurse to independent practice nurse. The literature has also revealed that new graduates change their profession at the first year of employment about 35%-60% because they were unable to cope with the stressful working environment and advance medical technology (Althaqafi, Alhatimi, Almalki, Alyamani, Banakhar 2019).

- **Workload and Time Management:**

Ten studies were included to review this theme. The most frequently reported challenge is the overwhelming workload. Interns often struggle with high patient-to-nurse ratios, which can lead to stress and difficulty in managing time effectively. Smith et al. (2022) found that interns frequently express feelings of being overwhelmed due to the volume of responsibilities, which can hinder their ability to learn and provide

quality care. The pressures of managing multiple tasks simultaneously often result in anxiety and decreased confidence (Johnson & Lee, 2023).

Plante (2024) revealed in his study that environmental barriers like patient workload, unpredictable patient flow and short staffing were the cause of occupational stress. The nursing interns reflect that lack of preparation about clinical situations led to perceived inability to accomplish clinical expectations. Hostetter (2020), conducted focus group discussions with graduating nursing students to identify common challenges they faced during role transition. The study identified issues such as feeling overwhelmed, lacking confidence in decision-making, and struggling with time management are the common concerns among students.

A study by Nguyen et al. (2022) indicated that the high-stakes nature of healthcare environments contributes to heightened stress levels among interns, who often feel unsupported in managing these pressures. Furthermore, emotional distress can negatively impact their clinical performance and decision-making abilities.

- **Communication Barriers**

To review this theme, four articles were chosen. Effective communication is critical in nursing, yet many interns face barriers when interacting with experienced staff. Wang, Zhang & Liu (2021) reported that interns often feel intimidated by supervisors and are reluctant to ask questions or seek help. This lack of open communication can lead to misunderstandings and reduce learning opportunities. The ability to communicate effectively is crucial for building professional relationships and ensuring patient safety.

- **Emotional Distress:**

To review this theme six were selected Nursing interns often face significant emotional distress when caring for critically ill or dying patients, which can impact their mental health and professional development. This distress stems from various factors, including anticipatory grief as they witness patients nearing the end of life, leading to feelings of sadness and helplessness (Hargrove & Davis, 2021). Additionally, moral distress frequently arises when interns encounter ethical dilemmas, leaving them feeling torn between providing the best possible care and the constraints of their training and experience. Exposure to trauma and suffering can contribute to vicarious trauma, further exacerbating emotional strain (Dunn & O'Connor, 2022). Many interns grapple with feelings of inadequacy when faced with complex clinical situations, fearing they may not make the right decisions or provide optimal care. The absence of support systems, such as mentorship or peer support, can intensify feelings of isolation during these challenging experiences (Gonzalez & Boucaut, 2023). Recent studies highlight the importance of emotional resilience and coping strategies in managing this distress, suggesting that fostering emotional intelligence may help interns navigate the pressures associated with end-of-life care (Shafiei & Kazemi, 2022). Overall, understanding and addressing the emotional challenges faced by nursing interns in these high-stress situations is crucial for their well-being and development as future healthcare professionals.

Discussion

The results scoping review reveals a range of interconnected difficulties that significantly impact the learning and development of nursing interns. Overwhelming workloads stand out as a primary concern, as many interns grapple with high patient-to-nurse ratios that impede their ability to engage meaningfully with patients and acquire essential clinical skills (Allen et al., 2022). This excessive workload not only hampers their educational experience but also contributes to heightened emotional stress and burnout, as interns struggle to balance demanding responsibilities with their learning objectives (Khamis, Youssef, & Khalil, 2022). The organizational environment further complicates these challenges, as hierarchical structures often leave interns feeling marginalized and unsupported, which exacerbates their emotional strain

(Lopez, Chen, & Garcia, 2022) Moreover, communication barriers frequently arise, making it difficult for interns to effectively interact with patients and collaborate with healthcare teams. This issue can result in misunderstandings and diminished confidence, ultimately affecting patient care (Clyne, O'Leary & Thompson, 2023). Additionally, the lack of mentorship is a critical gap in the internship experience, as many interns report insufficient guidance from experienced nurses, leaving them feeling isolated and overwhelmed (Thomas & McGowan, 2023). Mentorship is vital for building confidence and competence, and its absence can hinder professional development. Addressing these multifaceted challenges requires a holistic approach that involves restructuring workloads, fostering supportive organizational cultures, enhancing communication training, and implementing formal mentorship programs. To overcome these challenges of interns it is necessary for enhancing the quality of nursing education and practice. Healthcare institutions can create a more conducive learning environment that not only supports the growth of nursing interns but also enhances overall patient care outcomes, ultimately benefiting the healthcare system as a whole (Egan, 2016).

Conclusion

The challenges faced by nursing interns during clinical practice are multifaceted and significant, impacting their professional development and mental health. This systematic review highlights the emotional distress associated with caring for critically ill and dying patients, moral dilemmas, and the pressures of transitioning from academic environments to real-world clinical settings. Interns often experience feelings of inadequacy, stress from high workloads, and a lack of adequate support systems, all of which can hinder their ability to perform effectively. Future research should continue to explore these challenges and the effectiveness of various support strategies to ensure nursing interns can thrive in their clinical roles.

Recommendations

The findings underscore the need for targeted interventions to equip nursing interns with the skills and support necessary to navigate these challenges. The following are few recommendations to improve interns' experiences.

- Fostering a supportive learning environment and addressing the practical needs of nursing interns.
- Institutions should develop comprehensive orientation programs that prepare interns for the realities of clinical practice, focusing on time management and workload expectations.
- Establishing structured mentorship initiatives can provide the guidance and support that interns need to navigate clinical challenges effectively.
- Implementing policies to ensure manageable patient loads for interns can help alleviate stress and improve their learning experience.
- Providing access to counselling and peer support can help interns cope with the emotional demands of clinical practice.

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