Nursing skills: learning the community way

Student nurses have always learnt from qualified staff, in the past on the wards under matron and more recently on placement from university. With job opportunities for nurses growing ever-more varied, Emily Carney explains what it was like to spend some time with a tissue viability team in Worcestershire...

The nursing profession is rapidly changing and there are an abundance of different career paths available, with numerous opportunities to specialise — as a career, nursing is now far more than simply ‘bedpans and bandages’. However, as a student nurse, it is easy to focus on your own academic progress rather than looking around at how and why best practice has developed.

As a student nurse in my second year of a three-year degree course at King’s College London Florence Nightingale School of Nursing & Midwifery, I am currently required by the NMC to spend 2,300 hours in practice during my training. In my second year, I was given the opportunity to go on a four-week elective placement to broaden my scope of learning.

As my particular interest lies in tissue viability, I took up the offer to work with Jackie Stephen-Haynes, professor of wound healing at Birmingham City University, and consultant nurse at Worcestershire Health and Care NHS Trust.

As the care trust is the main provider of community and adult mental health services in Worcestershire — serving a population of approximately 560,000 with a high proportion of people aged 65 and over — I felt it would be the ideal place to learn about the full range of tissue viability issues.

Essentially, I was hoping to gain an insight into what it is like to be a consultant nurse. I wanted to expand my knowledge about the role and what happens behind the scenes of an NHS trust striving to achieve government targets, as well as providing a high-quality tissue viability service. I also hoped that the placement would enable me to increase my tissue viability knowledge.

‘As it happened, I was able to gain far more from this placement than I ever expected’

GREAT EXPECTATIONS

As it happened, I gained far more from this placement than I’d ever expected. Tissue viability is currently a nurse-led speciality, but also has a lot of crossover with other medical areas. Essentially, it is concerned with the prevention and management of all wounds — commonly pressure ulcers and leg ulcers — as well as overlapping with subjects like chronic oedema/lymphoedema, skin care and infection control. Unfortunately, however, despite this wide remit, wound care is often underrepresented in nurse training.

A consultant nurse has to focus on the delivery and maintenance of clinical excellence, which encompasses four key clinical areas:

- Clinical education
- Research
- Audit
- Leadership and management.

As the placement got underway, it soon became apparent that excellent managerial skills are essential and I saw first-hand how specialist nurses and team leaders managed the problems they face while simultaneously striving to improve practice. I also saw how new clinical guidelines for the trust are approved — firstly in the development stage, then at an approval meeting, where I was struck by how important evidence is in informing care.

PATIENT SAFETY

During my placement I was able to attend the trust’s serious incident forum and see how these types of events were discussed and managed. This was a real eye-opener, particularly the importance of quality care and documentation in practice.

From a tissue viability point of view, I was involved in creating new documentation to make it easier for nurses to record pressure ulcer prevention in patients’ notes. This helped to ensure that care was recorded accurately and made investigating the circumstances surrounding a serious incident much easier.

TRAINING DAY

A consultant nurse is also responsible
for improving outcomes and experiences for patients, families and carers. While on placement I took part in two education and training events — the annual pressure ulcer prevention conference and another event where clinicians were able to find out how to obtain pressure-reducing equipment and work with suppliers to improve services for patients.

As well as attending these events, I also helped to develop a new system for equipment selection in the trust and saw first-hand how hard it can be to create a document that has to be publicised to a staff group working across a large organisation.

**Guiding light**
Whatever their specialty, nurses need to constantly update their knowledge and while on placement I went to several study days where I learnt about new guidance and treatments. For example, I attended one that looked at a new wound debridement pad that had just been recommended by the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE), finding out all about its properties and why it represented a useful clinical option.

Another brilliant opportunity was being part of Wound Care Alliance UK's annual tissue viability conference (www.woundcareallianceuk.org.uk). There were a lot of other nurses there and I was able see first-hand all the hard work that goes into organising a large-scale nursing conference. As well as the conference, I also spent the day at Worcester’s Leg Club, where patients are able to socialise while receiving their leg ulcer treatment.

**‘Whatever their specialty, nurses need to constantly update their knowledge’**

**HANDS-ON EXPERIENCE**

The tissue viability team in Worcestershire provides an excellent clinical service to patients, carers and other specialties. I was able to observe the management of complex wounds and chronic ulcers and learnt about the different priorities for each patient. For example, some might need end-of-life care, while others required advanced wound management for leg ulcers, pressure ulcers or skin tears.

I was lucky that Rosie Callaghan, a specialist tissue viability nurse, showed me how a specialist nurse has to think ‘outside the box’, particularly when managing problematic wounds.

All of this was packed into four weeks and I recommend any student nurse who is able to spend time with specialists and leaders in their field to do so. Even as a student, the knowledge I gained will help me make better decisions in my future practice. I also learned the importance of good teamwork, which is what makes the tissue viability team in Worcestershire such a success.

**Find out more...**

Wound Care Alliance UK (WCAUK) is a charity that actively encourages clinicians to pursue their tissue viability education:

- Annual membership to the WCAUK is free until 2016. Find out how to join at: www.wcauk.org/register
- WCAUK, in collaboration with the JCN, now produces Wound Care Today, a journal which focuses on the latest developments in wound care. Read your copy at: www.jcn.co.uk/wct

Emily Carney: ‘Essentially I was hoping to learn what it was like to be a consultant nurse.’