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A Review of Entry-Level Nurse Characteristics and the NCLEX® Examinations Department

The NCLEX® is developed to measure the minimum knowledge, skills and abilities required to deliver safe, effective nursing care at the entry level. Part of the development process is to periodically review and define the examinee profile, the practice environment for entry-level nurses and the environment's effect on the length of the entry-level period. National Council of State Boards of Nursing (NCSBN®) conducts the NCLEX practice analysis every three years to analyze entry-level practice. Using the data collected in the practice analysis, NCSBN then moves to develop the NCLEX Test Plan. Analysis of data from a nine-year span indicated that the environment had become more complex; thus, the question arose about the current length of the entry-level period.

The entry-level nurse exhibits characteristics such as limited confidence, critical thinking and clinical judgment with the need for additional skill acquisition, (Cockerham, 2011; Martin, 2011; Weilding, 2011). Additionally, the newly licensed nurse delivers client care in today's fast-paced healthcare environment. The current practice setting of the entry-level nurse reflects delivery of complex care coupled with the need for rapid, appropriate clinical decision making, (Dyess, 2012).

Each profession sets out to define parameters focused on how long a newly licensed incumbent practices with entry-level characteristics. No one profession has identified a methodology to uncover the length of time entry-level characteristics exists, (Williams et al., 2014). Given the profile of entry-level characteristics, the literature has established that newly-licensed nurses are more likely to commit practice errors and therefore require structured transitional support during the entry-level period, (Cockerham et al., 2011; Martin & Wilson, 2011; Saintsing, Gibson, & Pennington, 2011; Zhong & Thomas, 2012;).

Given these circumstances, the length of time an entry-level nurse practices in the current healthcare environment with the identified characteristics remains an unknown. As a result, NCSBN conducted an analysis to evaluate the effects of the current practice environment and client population on the length of time entry-level nurse characteristics remain. Before the analysis, the entry-level period for the NCLEX examinee profile was considered to be six months (Williams et al., 2014).

NCSBN analyzed practices used in other professions to identify the entry-level period, the current entry-level practice environment, today's client population and the results of a nurse focus group. A group of 35 registered nurse (RN) and licensed practical/vocational nurse

(LPN/VN) volunteers experienced with entry-level RN or LPN/VN practice were divided into four groups. Each group participated in a facilitated discussion surrounding entry-level nurse practice, the practice environment and the current client population. After 15 minutes, the participants were asked to respond to the question of *how long must a newly licensed nurse practice before entry-level characteristics begin to dissipate?* Each nurse wrote the response on paper; individual responses were not revealed to the group. The RN panel responses ranged from 6 weeks to 24 months with a mean of 12.19 months and a standard deviation of 6.43. The LPN panel responses ranged from 6 -24 months with a mean of 13.40 months and a standard deviation of 6.88.

As a result of the findings, the NCSBN Board of Directors (BOD) has approved a revised definition of the entry-level nurse in the NCLEX environment. With the start of the next NCLEX practice analysis cycle and subsequent NCLEX test plan development and item generation, the NCLEX entry-level nurse will be defined as a nurse having no more than 12 months of experience. The revised definition may result in an amended list of entry-level nursing activities. If new entry-level nursing activities are discovered and applicable, they will appear on the NCLEX represented by examination items across varying difficulty strata. Uncovering a vastly different list of activities is unlikely, but a few additional activities may be discovered, (Williams et al., 2014).

References

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