Graduate Studies are Necessary to the Scholarship of Nursing

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Abstract

As the Canadian nursing shortage grows there is increased demand on nursing faculties and schools of nursing to produce sufficient numbers of entry to practice graduates who are eligible to join the profession. To compound matters, this growing shortage indirectly reduces the number of master’s and doctorate prepared nurses available to fulfill the scholarship requirements of research, publication and teaching. The scholarship of teaching is affected two-fold; firstly, fewer numbers of doctoral prepared nurses results in fewer supervisors and mentors available to new nursing scholars, and secondly, the academic qualifications of teachers are lowered as more master’s and baccalaureate prepared nurses take on increased teaching responsibilities. During the last 20 plus years, nursing professionals have worked hard to transform nursing from a skills-based occupation to a more scholarly profession imbedded in universities across Canada. The scholarly standing of nursing is threatened by the limited number of nurses pursuing graduate studies who are suitable to teach the next generation of nurses.

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The Canadian Federation of Nursing Unions predicts a shortage of 60,000 fulltime nurses by the year 2022 which will affect all areas of nursing practice (2011). This shortage will affect the numbers of practicing nurses with all levels of qualifications from the baccalaureate to the doctorate prepared nurse. To address the indirect shortage of masters and doctorate prepared nurses, many Canadian nursing faculties have created clinical nurse instructor positions that allow experienced baccalaureate nurses to teach clinical portions of the nursing curriculum as well as limited classroom content. The clinical nurse instructor serves to temporarily increase the number of eligible teaching faculty in support of nursing professors who are expected to carry out the activities of scholarship. The scholarship of nursing is threatened by the growing shortage of nurses as there will be too few masters and doctorate prepared nurses to do research, publish and teach.

The growing nursing shortage threatens the scholarship of nursing despite the hard work of the last 20 years by nursing experts who have transformed nursing from a skills-based practice, to a scholarly profession with an entrance to practice qualification of a baccalaureate degree. Hawranik and Thorpe (2008) support baccalaureate education as it is oriented to theory and emphasizes cognitive processing of nursing knowledge (p. 157). The Canadian Association of Schools of Nursing (CASN, 2011) supports baccalaureate preparation as nurses are then better suited to face the variety and complexity of professional nursing in the current Canadian healthcare system. The baccalaureate entrance to practice qualification establishes the groundwork of nursing scholarship. Undergraduate nurses are exposed to the foundations of nursing through education on nursing history, critical thinking, nursing research, trends in healthcare, and clinical experiences. Nursing instructors should be able to identify and promote
scholarly activities while teaching in undergraduate programs. As the demand for entry to practice nurses continues to increase there will be fewer nurses available to return for graduate study as the emphasis of nursing practice will remain at the bedside with baccalaureate prepared nurses. Now that nursing is credentialed as an academic profession it is necessary to advance nursing scholarship through graduate study. This can only be achieved by promoting scholarship within the profession and recruiting sufficient numbers of nurses to pursue advanced degrees.

All activities related to nursing scholarship are negatively affected by fewer numbers of nurses pursuing graduate studies. According to Boyer (1990), the traditional activities of scholarship consist of research, publication, service and teaching (p. 15). According to CASN scholarship includes discovery, service, integration, application and teaching and holds the position that all nurses have a responsibility to advance scholarship (2006, p. 2). In 1990 Boyer expanded the definition of scholarship to reflect the experiences of modern scholars to include discovery, integration, application and teaching while Thoun (2009) described emergent, educational, administrative, and professional patterns of scholarship which included pure research, teaching, and administration (p. 555). Boyer’s scholarship of discovery is congruent with Thoun’s concept of pure research and holds the pursuit of knowledge as the highest achievement (Boyer; Thoun). Research is fundamental to all scholarly professions as it provides the raw evidence which guides all disciplines and practice. Professional nurses shape their practice based on evidence gained from research in order to keep their work relevant and innovative.

The scholarship of discovery or pure research will be negatively affected by a shortage of nurses available to conduct research and publish. Nursing research is needed to discover and expose current health trends that represent the individual, family, community and global interests
through qualitative and quantitative study (CASN, 2011). The work of pure research is best suited for the doctorate prepared nurse who is able to include Boyer’s scholarship of integration as part of their data interpretation allowing researchers to identify themes or patterns and provide context and meaning to new information (1990, p. 19). According to Boyer the scholarship of application includes questions how new research can be used, and should result in a reciprocal renewal of theory and practice (p. 21). Nursing research should translate to changes in practice and practice should generate research inquiry. Nursing research is most effective when new discoveries lead to practice changes and innovations in the hospital, community, and educational environments. Nurses apply research with the aim to provide optimal patient care. The advanced scholarly skills required to conduct and interpret pure research demands a doctorate prepared nurse who holds appropriate academic credentials.

As fewer nurses pursue graduate studies the scholarship of teaching is greatly affected by decreased numbers of academically qualified masters and doctorate prepared nurse educators. Boyer (1990) describes the scholarship of teaching as significant as it is how discovery is translated into learning for the next generation and teaching should not just educate, but promote a scholarly approach to learning that lasts a lifetime (p. 23). A scholarly approach to learning should include active, creative, and critical thinking. In order to inspire scholarly learning, teachers should use superior teaching techniques such as analogies, metaphors and imagery that help bridge gaps between the teacher’s knowledge and student’s learning needs (Boyer, p. 24). Teachers should deliver content in well prepared lectures, through discussion, questions and student comments that will push professors to continue to be learners (Boyer, p. 24). Scholarly teaching is best suited to nurses who have advanced their own nursing knowledge and broadened their approach to teaching which can only be gained through masters and doctorate study. It is a
normal expectation that the nurse instructor hold higher nursing credentials than their students. This is particularly important as many nursing students hold degrees in other disciplines where teaching was provided by instructors with advanced degrees.

The nursing scholarship of teaching is threatened by the reducing numbers of graduate nurses producing fewer experts to deliver the science and art of nursing to the novice nurse (CASN 2006, p. 3). Scholarly masters and doctorate prepared nurses should be well-read intellectuals who are able to tailor their teaching to best prepare students for practice and continued scholarship (CASN, 2011, p. 3). According to CASN the scholarship of teaching should include both teaching and the study of teaching, as both serve to improve the dissemination of nursing knowledge. Optimal teaching of the art and science of nursing can only be delivered by nurses who have advanced their knowledge of the history and theoretical foundations of nursing in order to better comprehend and explain the phenomenon of nursing practice as an art and a science.

Nursing scholarship is negatively affected by the reducing numbers of master’s level nurses. According to CASN (2011) masters prepared nurses are necessary to completely integrate scholarship of nursing into practice, education, administration, research and policy as they add to interdisciplinary interchange of healthcare ideas (p. 1). Masters prepared nurses are expected to analyze, critique, and synthesize nursing research to further nursing practice (CASN, p.1). Masters prepared nurses are able to become leaders as advanced practitioners, educators, mentors and administrators and are best suited to implement changes related to evidence based practice in clinical settings (CASN; Mannix, Wilkes & Jackson, 2013; Stockhausen & Turale, 2011; Warren & Mills, 2009). Ruland and Leuner (2010) state that masters prepared nurses should work in non-tenure track positions in universities to prepare for eventual doctorate studies.
Watkins (2011) and Cotterill-Walker (2011) suggest that patient care is directly improved with masters prepared nurses as advanced practitioners and indirectly as a result of the personal benefits of increased confidence, cognitive functioning, development of evidence based practice, professionalism, and communication. Masters prepared nurses are better equipped to teach with advanced clinical knowledge, the ability to synthesize nursing information with a broader perspective, greater awareness of the current healthcare trends and have increased self-confidence and professionalism. The advanced degree held by masters prepared nurses adds credibility to their work in healthcare as they are seen as clinical experts and leaders as they combine extensive experience with advanced learning. They are seen as role models and should promote scholarship through advanced learning for all nurses.

As fewer nurses are available for graduate studies it follows that there will be fewer doctorate level nurses to maintain sufficient numbers of active scholars to research, publish, educate, and mentor the next generation of researchers (CASN, 2011, p. 1). This will result in fewer doctorate prepared nurses to teach new scholars how to fulfil all the roles required of them in a competitive healthcare research environment. Doctoral educated nurses are the best choice of nursing scholar to provide students at all levels with diverse intellectual perspectives to address social, ethical, cultural and political nursing issues (CASN 2011 p. 3). The scholarship of teaching requires active engagement with the practice community, as well as translation and dissemination of research findings that only doctoral prepared nurses can provide (CASN 2011, p. 4). Experts have claimed that only doctorate prepared nurses should be permitted to teach. Bartels states that master’s prepared nurse educators lack advanced nursing science expertise that the doctorate prepared nurse possesses (2006, p. 154). She claims that only doctorate prepared nurses hold the traditional credential for admittance into the academic environment and are the
only ones qualified to fulfil all scholarship activities including teaching (2006, p. 155). Doctorate prepared nurses represent the pinnacle of nursing knowledge and are needed to produce groundbreaking research in order to substantiate nursing as a discipline. Doctorate prepared nurses should be more visible within the nursing community in order to inspire scholarship and educate nurses by articulating what makes nursing unique and vital to healthcare.

There is little doubt that the current and projected nursing shortage will affect nursing scholarship as the shrinking number of graduate prepared nurses experience increased academic workloads (Emerson & Records, 2005, p. 9). According to the Canadian Nurses Association (CNA) in the 2009-2010 academic year 602 nurses completed masters and only 69 completed doctorate studies (2012, p. 9). The reduced pool of graduate prepared nurses affects the quality and credibility of nursing instruction for the baccalaureate and master’s students. This results in fewer doctorate prepared nurses to supervise and mentor current doctoral candidates. The creation of the baccalaureate prepared clinical instructor positions is a temporary solution that does not enhance nursing scholarship. A discussion of how to increase the number of nurses in graduate study programs is needed and should include ways to promote scholarship within nursing. Nursing needs to recruit the best baccalaureate students who understand that scholarship is paramount for the survival of the profession. The link between nursing practice and scholarship needs to be strengthened by making nurse scholars more visible within the nursing community through publication and educational presentations. Nurses need to actively support continued education and demand that healthcare institutions and government recognize the significance of nursing scholarship by creating policies, programs and incentives to support nurses pursuing graduate studies.
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