Why Should Nurses Care about a BSN?

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Throughout my nursing career and now as Chief Nursing Officer (CNO), I have often been asked about the value of a bachelor of science in nursing (BSN). In the early years of my career, little evidence existed to guide my response, but I have always encouraged students and nurses to pursue a BSN. For decades, many in nursing had advocated for advancing the education of nurses and promoted the concept of a bachelor’s degree for entry in to nursing practice.

Most recently, the Institute of Medicine (2010) released a report entitled, *The future of nursing: Leading change, advancing health*” that called for a nursing workforce consisting of 80 percent BSN-prepared nurses by 2020. This proposal supports having a nursing workforce that is well prepared to provide patient care at the bedside. This recommendation was supported by two decades of research that has demonstrated that education at the BSN level positively contributes to patient care outcomes and to high quality, safe patient care.

Nursing Education Level and Patient Outcomes
A number of researchers have examined the relationship of several nursing demographics to patient care outcomes. Those efforts have provided clear evidence about the importance of nursing education level in assuring safe, high quality patient care. Dr. Linda Aiken reported that the higher number of baccalaureate nurses in the acute care environment was related to lower patient mortality (Aiken, Clarke, Cheung, Sloane, & Silber, 2003).

In fact, Aiken subsequently reported that for every 10% increase in the proportion of BSN on a hospital’s staff was associated with a four percent decrease in the risk of death (Aiken, Clarke, Sloane, Lake, & Chaney, 2008). Friesse, et al., (2008) also reported that the nursing education level was associated with a lower mortality and failure-to-rescue rate for inpatient cancer patients. Other researchers have reported similar findings about the relationship of nursing education to patient outcomes (Tourangeau, et al., 2007; Estabrooks, et al., 2005; Kendall-Gallagher, et al., 2011).

Professional Development
A BSN supports professional development by providing learners with a more in-depth education in social sciences, community health, nursing research, the humanities, and nursing leadership. BSN programs are structured in such a way that learners also obtain a deeper knowledge of the health care policy; social, cultural and political issues; and health care financing. This knowledge better prepares students to navigate the complex health care system and support patients across the continuum of care. Characteristics that have been attributed to BSN-prepared nurses include critical thinking and knowledge of care management, ethical and clinical reasoning, and leadership skills (University Health System Consortium, 1999).

Nursing Lagging in Educational Expectations
As a profession, nursing has lagged in expectations for educational preparation compared to other disciplines, such as pharmacy and physical or occupational therapy, that now require preparation at the doctoral level. The desire to have a better educated nurse has become more pressing with the increasing complexity of nursing care and the practice demands in clinical environments. Additionally, many new nursing roles have emerged, such as nurse navigator, care manager, and unit educator, that demand and require a BSN.
Advantages of Higher Education
Nurses often say that having a BSN has helped them advance their career, increased their credibility, supported salary negotiations, opened opportunities to management and leadership positions, and helped them provide better care. Obtaining a BSN also supports a nurse’s ability to advance their education at the masters or doctoral level and pursue other advanced leadership, education or research positions. The most important things that nurses have told me are that advanced education improves their practice and makes them a better nurse.

If you were a patient…
Not every nurse will initially support the concept and rationale for BSN preparation. But if you were a patient, and you knew better outcomes were associated with BSN nurses – What education level would you want for the nurses taking care of you? Our profession and our patients demand changes in the educational preparation of nurses. A BSN is good for our patients and helps us provide high quality care with lower mortality. No longer can we rely on our opinions on this topic; we must be guided by the evidence and do what is in the best interest of our patients. It is simply the right thing to do to obtain a BSN.

My Personal Commitment
As CNO of Mission Hospital, I am committed to working toward achieving the goal of 80% BSN staff by 2020. It is an ambitious goal, but the nursing leadership team is committed to supporting creative and innovative strategies to support our existing and future staff in achieving this goal. Together, we can make this a reality and, in the process, learn and grow together in our efforts to ensure the highest quality outcomes feasible. I welcome ideas and thoughts about how we can support our direct care nurses in their pursuit of a BSN and hope you will share your ideas and perspectives.

References


University Health System Consortium. (1999, October). Survey on Educational Preparation of Nurses (pp. 2, 8). Oak Brook, Ill.