

Nursing unit managers: responsibility without power?

Dr Penny Paliadelis, RN, BN, MN (Hons),
PhD

Senior Lecturer, School of Health

Deputy Head of School/ Nursing Course
Coordinator



Background

Study background:

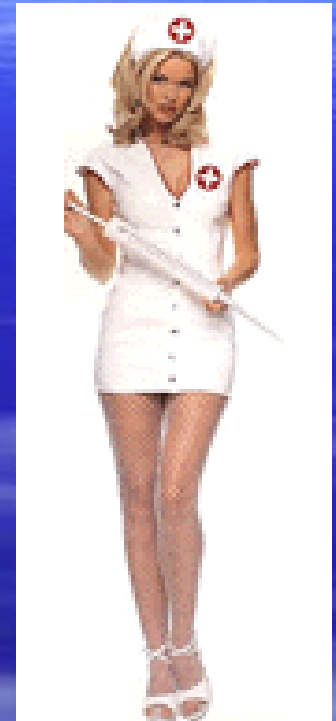
- The Australian Healthcare workplace culture:
 - Traditional roles in healthcare (Diers 2004)
 - Nurses' lack of voice and input into the decisions of healthcare organisations (Buresh & Gordon 2000; Diers 2004; Sullivan 2005)
 - Gendered nursing image and identity (Speedy 2006)

Traditional nursing images



Grumpy matron

Selfless angel
of mercy



Bimbo

Study topic

- **The working world of nurse managers.**
- I explored perceptions of the role from those in the position, I was interested in hearing about:
 - Workload/organisational expectations
 - Workplace geography
 - Education/support for the role
 - Identify as a nurse or a manager?
 - Is power commensurate with responsibilities?
 - Job satisfaction level
 - Challenges/concerns
 - Achievements/rewards
 - Rural focus

Context

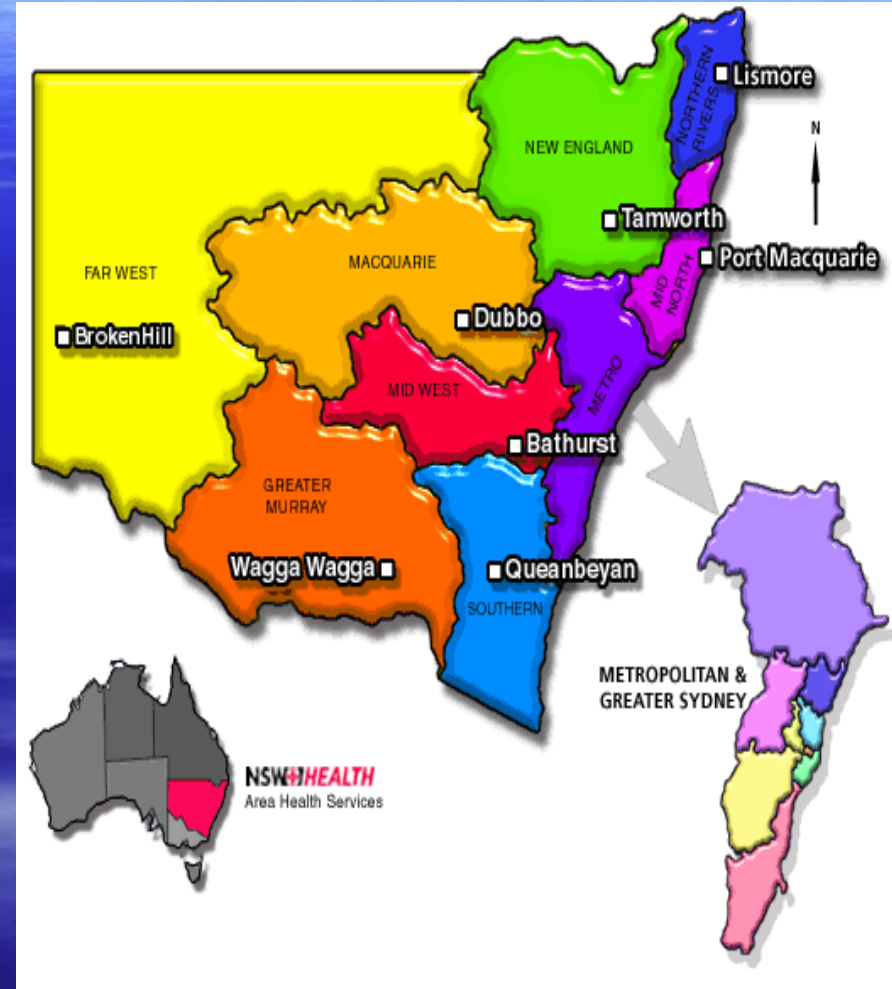
- An example of a nursing unit manager's role description in rural NSW. Essential criteria:
 - *Tertiary qualifications in health or management or other related discipline or significant progress toward completion, or willingness to undertake same.*
 - *Demonstrated high level of organizational, conceptual and analytical skills.*
 - *Demonstrated ability to monitor clinical services and activity, effective management of human, physical and financial resources.*
 - *Computer skills, familiarity with computerized health data systems.*
 - *Demonstrated team leadership skills.*
 - *Minimum of (5) years post basic experience.*
 - *Understanding of budget processes.*
 - *Demonstrated superior communication and negotiation skills.*
 - *Graduate certificate course in relevant clinical field or relevant clinical experience.*

Methodology

- Qualitative study using an eclectic feminist approach and individual interviews and observation as data collection methods.
- Underpinned by Kanter's organisational power framework
 - Power, according to Kanter (1977:166), is 'the ability to get things done', and in Kanter's view, power is to be found in a worker's ability to mobilize whatever resources are necessary to get the job done.
 - Power is determined by adequate access to organisational opportunities, support, information & resources.

Data Collection

- **Location: New England Area:** 98,000 square kilometres servicing the health needs of 175,000 people. At the time of the study there were 42 Nursing unit manager positions in the area.
- **Participants:** 20 nursing unit managers
 - Individual interviews and observation of workplaces:
 - 16 conducted in participants' workplace
 - 4 telephone interviews of 45 mins -1 hour



Data Analysis

- A qualitative data analysis method developed by Brown & Gilligan (1992) called the *voice-centered relational approach* to data analysis was used.
- Interview transcripts were considered from 4 different perspectives:
 - 1) The story as a whole
 - 2) Who is speaking
 - 3) The relationships of the speaker
 - 4) The context
 - This approach allowed issues of self image, the relational self, organizational context and power to be exposed.
 - Also, observations of the nursing unit managers' workspaces formed part of the data.

Findings

All participants identified that the role is expanding:

- *‘The job keeps getting bigger and involves the day-to-day management of the ward, the patient care, the staffing and monitoring the physical and financial resources’.*

All spoke of the challenges of being a clinician-manager:

- *‘I’m a nurse, and a good one. I’m probably only an average manager’.*
- *No matter what role I have I will always think of myself as a nurse’.*

Findings: A clash of values

Nurse v. manager

- *'Nurses care about patients, managers only care about budgets'.*
- *The difference between a nurse and a manager is, well a manager cares about money, but we don't, we care about patients. Nurses will always put the patient first.*

Nurse v. administration

- *'I try to hold the profession of nursing in respect but all the time admin ignores and devalues nurses'.*
- *I keep trying to think of myself as a manager, but they [the organization] don't ever let you forget you're a nurse.*
- *'The power [to make decisions] resides upstairs'.*

Observation of the nurse managers' working environment.

- All of the workspaces observed suggested a lack of organizational power, based on:
 - Lack of space and privacy
 - Lack of furniture
 - Lack of storage
 - Old, shabby fittings and office equipment (eg computers, desks)

Conclusions

- The organisational expectations of the nursing unit managers' role was unrealistic.
- The majority (n=18) had not received any managerial or leadership education or training and all felt poorly supported by the organisation.
- All participants retained a strong nursing identity as no alternative organizational identity was encouraged or supported.
- They all described a lack of access to an adequate level of organisational support, information, resources and opportunities within the organization.
- According to Kanter's (1977) theory this reflects a lack of organisational power.

Implications

- The participants will not be able to gain access to sufficient levels of organisational power unless they believe they have a rightful entitlement to do so and this entitlement is sanctioned by the organisation (appropriately resourced workspaces would also help in this regard).
- Nurse managers will always find it difficult to integrate the clinical and managerial aspects of their role if they have not received leadership/management training and if the organizational culture of healthcare does not change.
- Changes to the culture of healthcare workplaces must be driven by those who experience disempowerment within it.

Final thoughts

- Organizational power commensurate with the responsibilities of the participating nursing unit managers' role, will only occur with macro and micro level changes to the health care workplace culture:

MACRO:

- The development of a more contemporary nursing image will contribute to enhancing the status and voice of all nurses, including those in leadership/management positions.

MICRO:

- A reconceptualisation of the nursing unit manager's role description is required.
- Compulsory management qualifications for all nurse managers.
- A realistic workload with administrative support.
- NUMs need a process for greater input into organisational decision making.
- Organizationally sanctioned authority commensurate with level of responsibility.
- The provision of functional workspaces

References

- Brown, L. & Gilligan, C. 1992, *Meeting at the Crossroads*, Ballantine Books, New York.
- Buresh, B. & Gordon, S. 2000, *From Silence to Voice*, Cornell University Press, New York.
- Diers, D. 2004, *Speaking of Nursing: Narratives of Practice, Research, Policy and the Profession*, Jones & Bartlett, Massachusetts.
- Kanter, R.M. 1977, *Men and Women of the Corporation*, Basic Books, New York.
- Speedy, S. 2006, 'The gendered culture of nursing', in *Contexts of Nursing* 2nd edn, eds J. Daly, S. Speedy & D. Jackson, Elsevier, Sydney, pp. 155-169.
- Sullivan, E. 2004, *Becoming Influential: A Guide for Nurses*, Pearson Education, New Jersey.

Publications from this study:

- Paliadelis, P. & Cruickshank, M. 2008, 'Using a voice-centered relational method of data analysis in a feminist study that explored the working world of nursing unit managers.' *Qualitative Health Research*, vol. 18, no. 10, pp. 1444-1453.
- Paliadelis, P. 2008, 'The working world of nursing unit managers: Responsibility without power', *Australian Health Review*, vol. 32, no. 2, pp. 256-264.
- Paliadelis, P., Cruickshank, M. & Sheridan, A. 2007, 'Caring for each other: How nurse managers 'manage' their role', *Journal of Nursing Management*, vol. 15, no 8, pp. 830-837.
- Paliadelis, P. 2005, 'Rural Nursing Unit Managers: Education and support for the role'. *The International Electronic Journal of Rural and Remote Health Research, Education, Practice and Policy*, 5(325). Available from <http://rrh.deakin.edu.au>
- Paliadelis, P. 2004, 'Nurses as Managers: Education and Support for the Role' in *Education : Concepts and Practices*, eds A. Lazaridou, G. Papanikos & N. Pappas, Athens, Institute for Education and Research, Athens, pp. 559-567. ISBN:9608833116

University of New England, Armidale, NSW.

QuickTime™ and a
decompressor
are needed to see this picture.



November 2008

UNE
UNIVERSITY OF
NEW ENGLAND