

# Editorial

## Maternal child and family health nurses and continuing professional development

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*Editor*

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Since 2010, nurses and midwives have been required to undertake a minimum of 20 hours of continuing professional development (CPD) annually to maintain their health practitioner's registration in Australia. Maternal child and family health nurses (MCFHNs) who hold dual registration must complete CPD for both nursing and midwifery registers (NMBA 2022).

CPD aims to maintain competence by increasing nursing and midwifery knowledge and skills, and thus to protect the public by providing effective and safe practice (NMBA 2022). An early Australian study (Katsikitis et al. 2013) found that, generally speaking, nurses and midwives had a positive attitude and commitment towards CPD, valued the benefit of ongoing learning, and completed their required CPD hours. They perceived CPD as a means to maintaining relevancy and competency in their practice, learning new skills and contributing to evidence-based care (Mlambo et al. 2021).

CPD is synonymous with continuing education and lifelong learning and may take many forms. Formal learning includes study courses or workshops, appraising literature through journal clubs, or using competency frameworks to reflect on practice. Informal learning occurs through clinical supervision, attending team meetings/briefings, mentoring and clinical observations paired with self-reflection (Mlambo et al. 2021). There is, therefore, choice amongst the multiple forms of CPD available, although the literature indicates a high preference for work-based CPD activities (Katsikitis et al. 2013; King et al. 2020; Mlambo et al. 2021).

An individual nurse's learning needs will vary according to personal and professional factors experienced over their career trajectory. A scoping review of nursing practice by Hakvoort et al. (2022) identified three distinct streams – newly graduated nurses, experienced nurses, and experienced nurses with ambitions for advanced roles. The study highlighted that early career nurses need CPD programs that will assist them to 'fit in' with the clinical environment and increase their confidence in their skill sets. More experienced nurses require learning activities that will increase their clinical skills and prepare them for leadership and advocacy roles. Nurses seeking to expand and develop new roles prefer learning activities that will increase their job opportunities and fulfil their professional goals (Hakvoort et al. 2022).

There has been much interest in the literature in the factors that influence the uptake of CPD. Broadly, these can be divided into personal, contextual and organisational factors (Hakvoort et al. 2022). Nurses are motivated when they perceive the content as relevant to their clinical practice, there is support from their peers, and there is a positive workplace culture (King et al. 2020). A workplace that provides moral support in the form of an understanding management as well as structural support increases the uptake of CPD activities (Mlambo et al. 2021). An organisational culture that values learning and supports staff efforts in continuing education positively influences attitudes towards CPD (Katsikitis et al. 2013).

The perceived barriers to learning through CPD are well documented and not at all surprising. Personal factors include time pressures on nurses, stress caused by a heavy workload, family commitments and pressures outside of the workplace, and financial reasons (King et al. 2020; Mlambo et al. 2021). Organisational factors include lack of funding and support from the employer, and lack of relief staff. Perceived lack of support from managers was taken as an indication that the organisation did not take staff development seriously (Hakvoort et al. 2022).

Nurses are willing to meet their responsibilities and understand and appreciate the value of CPD to raising standards and advancing the professional status of nursing. They recognise that improving clinical practice has direct effects on patient care, and benefits both the organisation and the career prospects of the individual nurse (Mlambo et al. 2021).

Whilst individual characteristics have some influence, the literature is clear that a supportive environment is a pre-requisite to encouraging activity in CPD (Hakvoort et al. 2022; King et al. 2020; Mlambo et al. 2022). An encouraging workplace culture is instrumental in the uptake of CPD activities and involves peers and management in a shared responsibility. An environment that supports learning allows staff time to engage in learning, provides opportunities for learning geared to career goals, and offers adequate time to participate in CPD activities. The uptake of CPD activities is increased where financial and practical support are provided, such as offering CPD within work hours and providing staff cover to release nurses to attend CPD activities. Moreover, staff feel valued when organisations are seen to have commitment and support for CPD for their staff (Mlambo et al. 2021).

The goal of CPD is improving practice and therefore clinical outcomes, but it takes time, energy and commitment. Perhaps the last word on this topic comes from the metasynthesis of the literature on nurses and CPD by Mlambo et al. (2021, p.8):

*...in more than one study... it was articulated that learners want to know there is an appreciation for the time and dedication needed to engage in CPD.*

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