

Recruitment & retention

Sabbatical allows RNs to test OR waters

How would you like a chance to return to nursing school, knowing you already love nursing and feel comfortable with basic nursing care?

That's how an RN at Newton-Wellesley Hospital, Newton, Mass, described her experience in the hospital's nursing sabbatical program. The hospital developed an in-house sabbatical program as a retention strategy in 2002.

"We received feedback from the staff that we were not doing enough to retain nurses and allowing them to grow into other positions," says Susan Duffy Smith, RN, director of perioperative services.

A win-win

For example, if a staff nurse from a specialty such as labor and delivery wanted to transfer to the OR, the nurse would not be considered because OR experience was required. Some staff were leaving because they could not transfer.

"The sabbatical program allows staff to work in another specialty area for 3 months and test the waters without losing their current positions," notes Smith.

Some participants realize how much they like their original positions and return with expanded nursing knowledge. Others like the new specialty better and gain enough experience to apply for a transfer to that department.

For example, a postanesthesia care nurse was awarded a sabbatical in the outpatient minimally invasive gynecology unit last fall. Though the nurse originally thought she wanted to move to a different type of nursing, after the sabbatical, she realized she wanted to stay in the postanesthesia care unit.

Whether nurses gain a renewed enthusiasm and decide to stay in their original specialty or like the new specialty and transfer, it's a win-win for recruitment and retention, says Smith.

The 3-month sabbaticals, which the hospital offers 2 to 3 times a year, are rotated through all the departments. Departments that can free up their educators and have enough preceptors agree to take sabbatical nurses.

The OR benefits if a sabbatical nurse has a good experience and enrolls in a program to prepare for perioperative nursing. The sabbatical also enhances the relationship between the OR and the sabbatical nurse's home department.

Ginny McCabe, RN, an L & D nurse who recently completed an OR sabbatical, says she chose the OR because she wanted to develop a positive working relationship with OR colleagues and learn more about the area.

McCabe says she "is in awe" of the technical abilities and knowledge of perioperative RNs, especially their ability to learn new equipment quickly. McCabe kept a daily journal so she could share the information with her L & D co-workers.

Orienting to the OR

The sabbatical nurse's OR orientation follows the same objectives as that for a newly hired RN. Sabbatical nurses work closely with the educational resource nurse and review policies and procedures, operating room systems, and sterile technique. They are assigned to preceptors and rotate through as many services as possible.

McCabe progressed from observing to assisting the circulating nurse. As the weeks passed, she says her comfort level and independence increased.

OR retention value

Having a sabbatical nurse is a great opportunity for any OR, says Smith. Because most colleges and universities do not prepare nurses for the perioperative setting, and student nurses aren't exposed to the OR environment unless they request it, she says any opportunity to expose nurses to the OR, such as the sabbatical program, is invaluable. ❖

—Judith M. Mathias, RN, MA

In-house sabbatical protocol

At Newton-Wellesley Hospital, nurse sabbaticals are subject to the following terms:

- The hospital will offer sabbatical opportunities annually—each for a 3-month period: 2 opportunities in odd years and 3 opportunities in even years. Opportunities will be posted for 1 week.
- Nurses must fulfill a 1-year work commitment after completing sabbaticals.
- To be eligible, nurses must have at least 2 years' seniority and must be regularly scheduled to work or have worked an average of 24 hours per week over a 6-month period immediately before the sabbatical. Nurses will work the same number of hours as they are regularly scheduled.
- Nurses will be selected by seniority unless a documented performance problem exists.
- Nurses can apply for a second sabbatical if there are no other applications and if the nurses have worked for at least 2 years since the last sabbatical. Two nurses from the same department cannot be selected for successive sabbaticals.
- The hospital will assign preceptor nurses to work with the sabbatical nurses. Sabbatical nurses may be given patient assignments if the preceptors and hospital agree they are competent to do so.
- The hospital will provide classroom orientation if available.
- After completing sabbaticals, nurses will be evaluated on knowledge, experience, and performance. Evaluations will be used when assessing nurses for vacancies in the new department.
- Before starting sabbaticals, nurses will have informational interviews with the department manager to discuss the nurses' expectations and needs of the department.