



# Following the Leaders

## An inside look at precepting

By David Cohen

The work of a nurse preceptor, a long-established but informal practice in American medicine, is coming of age. In hospitals throughout Chicagoland, preceptor programs are expanding and larger numbers of personnel are becoming involved. The result? Hospitals are improving the quality of treatment they offer while improving staff nurse retention rates.

Preceptors themselves are discovering the personal and financial rewards of helping new and often less experienced colleagues fit into the hospital on both a personal and a professional level.

### What It Takes

According to **Rose Ziffra**, RN, a staff nurse at **Adventist Hinsdale Hospital** who has been a preceptor for 20 years, there is much more mentoring in today's precepting programs than there was in the past.



Rose Ziffra, RN

In fact, Ziffra remembers her first preceptor as a nurse at a different hospital as "mean and intimidating."

"She asked me questions that she knew I couldn't answer," says Ziffra, "and I decided that I would never be like that."

To ensure effective precepting, preceptors at Adventist Hinsdale go through training that borrows from the "train the trainer" methods of other professions, explains Ziffra. "In our classes, instructors teach us how to mentor, how to communicate and the techniques of cross-cultural training," she says. "Different preceptors have different methods of instruction. Some demonstrate a procedure, and others simply explain...It's important to be a mentor because even experienced nurses can have questions."

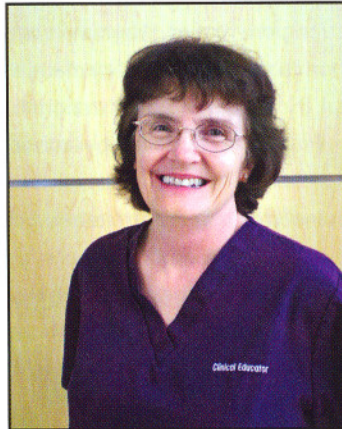
Being an effective preceptor takes more than skill; you also need a personality to match. **Michelle Nottoli**, RN, clinical manager/coordina-



Michelle Nottoli, RN

tor of surgical pediatrics at **Adventist La Grange Memorial Hospital**, says the two essential qualities of an effective preceptor include the ability to communicate and a strong set of clinical skills.

Thus, preceptor work may not be for everyone. As the clinical educator at **Adventist Bolingbrook Hospital**, **Kathy Garrett**, RN, is responsible for selecting and training preceptors. She has found that some nurses are not effective teachers, while others are not particularly empathetic with the new hires. "Sometimes, nurses can be hard on new employees coming in," she notes. "[I] have to remind the staff that we were all once young and new. The work of the preceptor is more valued today than before by nursing administration. Before, they used to throw young nurses to the wolves, and it was a matter of sink or swim."



Kathy Garrett, RN

### Time Commitment

Today, however, hospitals are investing time and money into effectively training their new nurses with preceptor programs designed to help nurses acclimate and succeed. At Adventist Hinsdale, for instance, depending on the new nurse's experience level, mentoring can last from a few days to six months. The training often involves the myriad procedures undertaken at the hospital and the more mundane tasks of charting on computers, a relatively new activity even for those who've worked at the facility for years.



Linda Greer, RN

Regardless of how long the precepting last, many nurses agree that time spent precepting is easy to justify. "I see nurses who are scared in the beginning, but over time they become more confident," Ziffra says. "[Precepting] helps with our retention rate. If you give nurses a good orientation and make them feel welcome, they will stay. Nursing is often teamwork, and it matters how well people work together."

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## Nurses Lounge



**Linda Greer**, RN, a staff nurse in orthopaedics at **Marianjoy Rehabilitation Hospital** in Wheaton, returned to the nursing profession three years ago after a 13-year hiatus. She quickly volunteered to become a preceptor nurse. She joined the staff at Marianjoy after taking a nurse refresher course at the College of DuPage. "Marianjoy lacked a precepting program when I returned," she says, "but the hospital did have a strong orientation program. It lasts 10 days and covers a lot of material, from pharmacy to dietary matters, topics that are specific to the hospital. [Now], new hires go straight from orientation to a nurse preceptor."

Precepting at Marianjoy lasts six weeks and covers various hospital specialties, including orthopaedics; pediatrics; and the treatment of spinal cord injuries, stroke and traumatic brain injuries. Each floor has a different preceptor that helps the new hires acclimate themselves to the facility and the area of the expertise in which they work.

### Becoming a Preceptor

**Alice Siehoff**, RN, clinical education coordinator at **Central DuPage Hospital (CDH)**, says the facility has adopted a formal process for preceptor selection and education. The hospital has also introduced a cash-based incentive program in which preceptors who keep the nurses they have been training on staff for a full year can obtain a retention bonus.



*Alice Siehoff, RN*

Precepting is voluntary for nurses, and those who apply must go through an interview with a patient care manager. Preceptor candidates are chosen based on the strength of their clinical competency and upon their less formal criteria, including having a general willingness to help. "You need to love to teach, mentor and share your knowledge," Siehoff says. "Preceptors love to see other develop their careers."

Matching up trainers and trainees is not particularly technical, according to Siehoff. At CDH, nurse managers begin by arranging the pairings in terms of shifts and specialties. Nurse preceptors take a one-day workshop that emphasizes adult learning, communication strategies and techniques of assessing nursing competency.

The hospital also holds quarterly meetings for the senior nurses to both keep the program fresh and to act as "a kind of continuing education for our preceptor training. It gives people a chance to brainstorm with others, and it includes important updates, such as computerized charting. It's a sharing of ideas in a formalized program," explains Siehoff.

## Personal and Professional Rewards

"It's a particular joy for me to be a preceptor nurse," says Greer. "The new nurses come two nights a week and start with a four-hour shift and maybe one patient. They build up to full eight-hour shifts to a maximum of five to six patients...Over eight weeks, you can see them develop and watch their confidence grow."

Nottoli notes that new hires cannot be expected to have the same level of knowledge as nurses who have been at the facility for years. If new nurses are not matched up with a preceptor, they may feel intimidated and overwhelmed. Thus, mentoring becomes essential for nursing retention. Like other hospitals, Adventist La Grange has introduced formal precepting classes for nurses, which consists of two 16-hour days.

"You're pleased with the results you see as a preceptor," concludes Nottoli. "You see the people out there working and working well. I feel that I laid the foundation for that. Maybe in five to 10 years they'll remember their preceptor."

## Today's Challenges

As in every area of nursing, there are challenges in precepting today. "There is less time to train people today, and the expectation is that they'll know everything they need to know quickly," says Nottoli, who has been a preceptor for 21 years.

So how can this be done realistically? "The trick is not to threaten new nurses, but to create an environment in which they can ask questions," reveals Nottoli.

The level of necessary precepting often depends on the experience of the new hire. For a new graduate, precepting can span eight to 12 weeks; whereas, an experienced nurse may require six weeks, and those transferring from one floor of the hospital to another can take a little less time.

At Adventist LaGrange, all employees new to the hospital are screened by hospital educators using a skills checklist. After an employee has been on staff for three to four months, the list is updated to check the employee's progress. "It gives us a baseline, and the issues are all very specific, such as naming a particular piece of equipment," says Nottoli.

## Lasting Impact

The bond formed between a preceptor and a new nurse can make a strong impact on the nurses personally and professionally, an impact on patient care and an impact on the facility in which they work.

"There's usually a group of nurses who are interested in coaching and mentoring new people," says Garrett. "New employees want someone to ask them to lunch or tell them where to find the blood pressure cuff. You have to make people feel part of a group and make them feel welcome. Then they will do a much better job." **NL**

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