

How to help international nurses adjust

Use these practical tips to help international nurses make an effective transition to U.S. practice.

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If you're not already working with nurses educated in other countries, you may be soon. With your support, they'll make a good transition and become solid team members. Here's what you can do to help.

1. Take the initiative. Introduce yourself, welcome nurses from other countries to the unit, and introduce them to other team members. Like many international nurses, they may speak English as a second language or come from a culture in which assertiveness isn't encouraged. Their reluctance to make the first move would unnecessarily isolate them. Taking the time to make them feel welcome and valued will set them up for success.

2. Explain how the system works. Nursing in the United States may be quite different from the clinical experiences international nurses had at home. They may be overwhelmed by how much responsibility nurses assume, how much technology nurses use, and how fast the pace of activity is. Help them understand each health care team member's role and who's responsible for what so they can see how they fit into the unit and the hospital.

3. Clarify abbreviations, slang, and idioms when using them in practice. Many international nurses' knowledge of English comes mainly from textbooks. What most don't bring to the clinical setting is a working knowledge of the terms specific to U.S. practice. Although some terms are regional in nature, many are common across practice settings—such as “dig” for digoxin.

Remember, international nurses probably won't understand common conversational jargon either. They may not know how to respond to “What's up?” or understand that “Later” may mean goodbye. Learning the lingo—clinical and nonclinical—is critical to fitting in.

The survey said...

In research conducted by the Commission on Graduates of Foreign Nursing Schools, international nurses cited several areas in which they needed help: working through the immigration process, completing licensure requirements, and adapting to U.S. nursing practice. When asked how their transition to the work setting could be improved, they cited:

- more intensive orientation to the work setting
- better staffing ratios
- a clearer understanding of the U.S. health care system
- greater support from hospitals and health care team members.

4. Share the unit's “cultural norms.”

Every facility and every unit has unwritten rules of behavior and practice. Knowing them is critical to functioning as part of the team. Think back to when you began working in your present position. What did you need to know to get comfortable in the setting? Who helped you the most? What kind of assistance was crucial to becoming part of the team? Nurses from other countries need this

same help. Teach them the basics, including things that may seem obvious to you. For example, tell them that report is given at the beginning and end of each shift, show them how to get the supplies they need, and encourage them to ask co-workers' advice about anything they're struggling with, such as how to juggle priorities.

5. Explain cultural aspects of care. Many of these nurses come from more homogeneous cultures than ours. As a result, they may find the ethnic and religious diversity among health care professionals, staff, patients, and the community challenging. And they may be surprised by the acceptance of diversity in the United States.

To help international nurses adjust, share your experiences of caring for patients from different cultures or lifestyles and what challenges they've presented to you. Make sure they know about religious and cultural practices related to health care, such as kosher diets, folk practices, use of spiritual advisers, and the role of family in health care decisions. Conversely, seek their advice if you have patients from their country or background.

6. Encourage them to share health care practices from their home country. Asking international nurses to share their experiences shows respect for cultural differences and will make them feel valued. Whether you adopt the practices



or not, sharing them will enrich the work you do together.

7. Help with pronunciation of medical terms. If English is their second language, let them know that you realize how difficult the language can be. Without being condescending, offer to help them learn the appropriate use of terms and how to pronounce them. When they know that they're communicating clearly, they'll gain the confidence to speak up.

8. Share good nursing resources. Help international nurses find the resources they need to develop and maintain their clinical competence. Show them the nursing journals, books, and CDs you find helpful, tell them about continuing-education courses available to them, and recommend nursing Web sites they might like. Make sure they understand how reading journal articles, for instance, will keep them up-to-date on

U.S. practice and will help them learn the language and terminology.

9. Provide positive feedback. Take time to acknowledge what they do well. Be specific. You can always find something positive to say. Feedback does make a difference—and it will encourage them to believe in their ability.

10. Offer help without being asked. Many international nurses are concerned about asking for help for fear that they'll be perceived as incompetent. Knowing that someone is willing to help without being asked or being judgmental can help allay their anxiety and enable them to practice more comfortably. So let them know that you aren't too busy to help or to listen. And when you need help, ask them. Many international nurses have practiced in their home countries for years before coming to the United States and would welcome the opportunity to

have their expertise recognized.

11. Invite them to be part of the team. As you would with any new nurses, invite them to go on break or to lunch with you and your friends or co-workers. Ask about life in their country. Talk about how they're adjusting not just to the unit but also to life in the United States. Share stories and ask what you can do to make their adjustment easier. If possible, invite them to functions outside of the hospital. A sense of belonging is critical to successful practice.

As you can see, international nurses have many of the same basic needs as any nurses new to a unit. Welcoming them, respecting their diversity, and providing technical and moral support will help them move back to that role of expert provider of care. And you'll gain more confident and capable team members as a result. **Q**

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