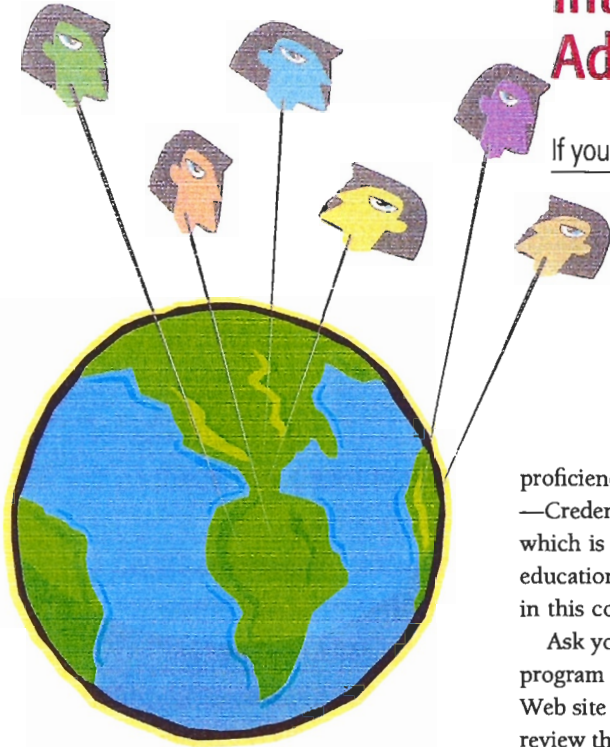


International nurses: Adapting to U.S. nursing practice

If you're just arriving or still adjusting, this advice will be priceless.

By Catherine R. Davis, RN, PhD
Director of Research and Evaluation
Commission on Graduates of Foreign Nursing Schools • Philadelphia, PA



NAVIGATING immigration, moving to a new land, obtaining state licensure, and getting comfortable in a health care environment different from the one you're used to can be a lengthy process. To ensure a smooth transition, focus on the key areas listed below:

1. Contact your state board of nursing.

In the United States, licensure is delegated to individual states. You'll need to contact your state's board of nursing to discover its requirements and begin the licensure process—remember, you can't work as a nurse in the United States without a nursing license. For contact information on all state boards, visit the National Council of State Boards of Nursing's (NCSBN) Web site at <http://www.ncsbn.org>.

2. Contact the Commission on Graduates of Foreign Nursing Schools (CGFNS).

As a prerequisite for licensure, many state boards require that nurses educated in other countries have their education and licensing credentials reviewed and, in most instances, their nursing knowledge and English language proficiency evaluated by the CGFNS. The boards require nurses to use one of two CGFNS programs:

—Certification Program, which includes a credentials review, the CGFNS Qualifying Exam, and an English language

proficiency examination—Credentials Evaluation Service Report, which is a written analysis of how your education compares with that provided in this country.

Ask your state board which CGFNS program it requires, and visit the CGFNS Web site at <http://www.cgfns.org> to review the programs and apply online.

3. Schedule your licensure examination—and learn what it entails.

Try to schedule this examination as soon as possible after you graduate (studies show that taking the exam soon after graduating increases the odds of passing). Offered by the NCSBN, the exam is called the "NCLEX" (National Council Licensure Examination). It's offered regularly at testing centers nationwide; check with your state board of nursing to locate one near you. The examination is given by computer, but you won't need extensive computer skills to respond to the questions. What can help is getting familiar with how the test is constructed, reading nursing journals to familiarize yourself with U.S. nursing practice, and talking with colleagues about the examination. You'll need to demonstrate an understanding of nursing as it's practiced here, as well as your critical thinking skills.

4. Prepare for the test.

The questions in both the CGFNS and NCLEX examinations appear in various formats. For example, you may get questions that ask you to identify an area on a picture or graphic, to fill in a blank with your answer, or to select more than one response from a list of possible answers. However, most questions will be in a

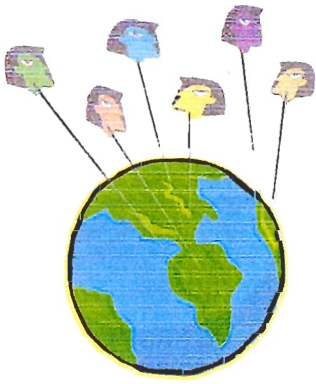
standard multiple-choice format that asks you to choose the single best answer among four options. These can be challenging for international nurses who are used to taking essay tests. If you need practice, look for review books or CDs at local bookstores or online at major booksellers' sites or at publishers' sites, or take a review course, which are offered by many testing companies, colleges, and universities.

5. Increase your English language proficiency.

Not surprisingly, nurse executives cite English language proficiency as critical to safe nursing care in the United States. So if English is your second language, take steps to improve your comprehension and pronunciation before and during your transition to practice here. Don't hesitate to use the language for fear that others will think you aren't competent—language skills improve with practice. If you don't understand a term someone uses, ask her to explain it. Look for publications that give the meanings of idioms, abbreviations, and slang terms U.S. nurses use. Most of all, don't feel that you have to apologize for your English skills.

6. Take advantage of improved orientations.

A current initiative in the United States focuses on patient safety. That's because the Joint Commission for Accreditation of Healthcare Organizations (JCAHO), which accredits U.S. health care facilities, has established Patient Safety Goals for 2004 (for details, see <http://www.jcaho.org>). With these goals in mind, hospitals are adapting and improving international nurses' orientation. For example, your



orientation may be longer and broader in scope than that provided for U.S.-educated nurses and it may be conducted at a slower pace.

The staff that orients you will need to know what works best for you and what areas they need to expand, so don't hesitate to tell them. For example, international nurses already in practice here report wanting to learn more about using nursing and medical technology, giving and receiving shift reports, using computers for charting, and delivering medications to patients.

7. Request information about the U.S. health care system—not just the place where you'll work. The U.S. health care system is complex, so you may appreciate getting an overview during your orientation. Ask for descriptions of health care team members and their roles, health insurance, and how patients access the health care system. Granted, you probably won't understand the system thoroughly until you work within it, but gaining a preliminary impression will help ease your transition.

8. Ask what support system the hospital has in place for international nurses. According to nurse executives, support systems are vital to international nurses' ability to adapt to U.S. nursing practice, and many hospitals make an effort to provide them. For example, be sure to ask if the hospital has an internship program for international nurses. Will the hospital provide you with a mentor or preceptor to guide you through the transition and help you to understand how hospi-

tal processes interrelate, how to care for patients, and how new technology works?

9. Seek out regional support groups. Look for a support group that helps newcomers adapt to life in the United States. It should consist of people from your country or ethnic background, particularly those who share your language if it's other than English. Group members who've been through the immigration and transition processes can share their experiences with you. Contact your local Chamber of Commerce to ask what's available near you.

10. Work on being assertive. Accountability is the cornerstone of U.S. nursing practice. Nurses are expected to be advocates for their patients, to manage a group of patients, and to provide safe care. Nurses question physician orders that appear incorrect or incomplete, speak up when they see an error or an injustice, and negotiate for a safe care environment. Although asserting yourself in various situations may be difficult, especially if you have concerns about your English language skills, it's crucial to safe nursing practice. Ask your preceptor to work with you on assertiveness skills or take a look for a course in a local high school or university.

The demand for nurses is expected to increase substantially in the United States in the next decade as the nursing shortage grows. International nurses like you will continue to play a significant part in easing that shortage. Seize the opportunity and prepare carefully so you can be an effective team member in these challenging and rewarding times. ❶

Reprinted with permission of the publisher, Lippincott Williams & Wilkins, from "International Nurses: Adapting to U.S. Practice" by Catherine R. Davis, RN, PhD, in the *Nursing2004 Career Directory*. © 2004. All rights reserved.