International nurses: Adapting to U.S. nursing practice

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

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Certification Program, which includes your state's board of nursing to discover site at http://www.ncsbn.org.

State Boards of Nursing's (NCSBN) Web site at http://www.ncsbn.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.

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 CD-ROM 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 conduct-
ed 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 exam-
ple, 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 mem-
bers 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 internation-
al nurses. According to nurse execu-
tives, support systems are vital to
international nurses' ability to adapt to
U.S. nursing practice, and many hospi-
tals make an effort to provide them.
For example, be sure to ask if the hos-
pital has an internship program for
international nurses. Will the hospital
provide you with a mentor or precep-
tor 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 new-
comers adapt to life in the United States.
It should consist of people from your
country or ethnic background, particular-
ly 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. Ac-
countability is the cornerstone of U.S.
nursing practice. Nurses are expected to
be advocates for their patients, to man-
age a group of patients, and to provide
safe care. Nurses question physician
orders that appear incorrect or incom-
plete, 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 dif-
cult, especially if you have concerns
about your English language skills, it's
crucial to add nursing practice. Ask your
preceptor to work with you on assertive-
ness 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.