

Guidance for Shift Working:

Nursing & midwifery students



Division of Nursing, Midwifery & Social Work
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Shift working whilst in your allocated learning environment – guidance for nursing & midwifery students

Practice learning experiences are a significant aspect of the pre-registration curriculum across all 3 years of the course programme. Depending on the learning experience students may work a range of shift patterns. The Nursing and Midwifery Council (NMC) stipulate that:

- Students should demonstrate exposure to **24-hour care over a seven day week.**
- Students retain **supernumerary status.**
- There are suitable systems, processes resources and individuals in practice to ensure safe and effective coordination of learning within the environment

Therefore, shift patterns should primarily reflect the requirements of the NMC, in addition to the educational needs of the student.

It is anticipated that in general, both students and practice supervisors will, in the spirit of negotiation, be able to plan appropriate shift patterns around the university practice and theory days, whilst also being mindful of educational opportunities and individual student needs (for example, occupational health recommendations). Sometimes however, further guidance is needed to help facilitate provision of appropriate shift allocation.

Hence, these guidelines are intended to help students and practice supervisors to negotiate working patterns that are educationally appropriate and supportive of student health needs. These guidelines have been written in consultation with students, practice partners (PEFs) and academic colleagues.

These guidelines will cover the following areas:

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Long Shifts

- **Shift length:** A long shift consists of 13.5 hours which must include a 1 hour break (i.e. 12.5 hours in total).
- **Breaks:** Each long shift should incorporate the equivalent break of 1 hour. There should be a minimum of 2 breaks across the long shift. However, all breaks should reflect the needs of the student in negotiation with their Practice Supervisor
- **Occupational Health (OH) requirements:** Some students with particular health needs are not required to work long shifts; this will be specified within their individual support plan in practice (ISPP).
- **Maximum number of long shifts per week:** Where students are completing their block learning experience (i.e. 5-day full weeks in practice), the maximum number of long shifts would be 3 shifts per week. Guidance for students out in practice for 2 /3 days per week (when they are in university the other days) should therefore be adjusted accordingly.
- **Student Midwives with caseloads who work over 12.5 hours:** There may be instances where students work in excess of the usual 12.5 hours, for example when they are providing intra-partum care. In such an instance when the student chooses to stay, then s/he would work in an 'observational capacity' only (i.e. not directly involved in patient care).

Night Shifts

- **Number of night shifts:** Whilst there is no set minimum number of night shifts for students to complete, there is a very clear requirement for students to demonstrate exposure to 24 hour care; this should include night shifts.
- **Continuity of student support:** There may be an educational advantage in working nights where consistency/continuity of practice supervision aids the educational and practice development of the student.
- **Breaks:** There should be a minimum 1 hour break across the whole night shift. This should be a minimum of 2 breaks; the nature of breaks should reflect the needs of the student in negotiation with the practice supervisor.
- **University theory days:** Students must not work a night shift the night before a university theory day, when they need to attend lectures/seminars. Similarly, students should not attend for a university theory day and be allocated a night shift the same day.

Breaks

- **Legal Requirements:** It is a legal requirement that students take a minimum 20 minute break within a 6 hour period.
- **Student Responsibility:** Students need to take responsibility for their own health in relation to the NMC Code (2015). This includes being able to negotiate a reasonable break pattern with their practice supervisor.
- **Additional Occupational Health requirements:** Specific health needs may require the student to take breaks at particular intervals. Requirements such as these should be discussed at the beginning of placement so that all those working with the student can facilitate this.

Gaps between shifts

- **Gaps between shifts:** There should be a minimum of 11 hours between the completion of one shift and the start of another.
- **Frontloading:** Students must **NOT** front load their hours in order to finish a placement early. Approximately the same number of hours should be completed each week.
- **Holidays during term-time:** Students are **NOT** permitted to take annual leave during university term-time (this includes theory and practice). Authorised absence in extenuating circumstances should only be sanctioned by the student's Academic Advisor.
- **Student Midwives with caseloads:** Those students working in excess of the usual 12.5 hours are working in an 'observational capacity' only (i.e. not directly involved in patient care).

Weekends and Bank Holidays

- **Weekends:** Students will be expected to work weekends over the three year programme. For example, when there is an educational advantage where consistency/continuity of supervision in practice is evident which aids the educational and practice development of the student.
- **Bank holidays:** Students are not expected to work Bank Holidays, but can work them if they choose to do so.

Pregnant Students

- **Pregnant students:** Pregnant students should only ever work an 8-hour shift whilst on placement; hence, neither long shifts nor night shifts are permitted.

Self-care and Shift Adjustment

Self-care is an important part of students' professional development, and the Royal College of Nursing guidance on adjusting to shift working (*'A Shift in the Right Direction'*, RCN 2012) has helped to inform this guidance:

Sleep Hygiene:

It is recommended students;

- Develop a bedtime ritual that is followed before sleep, e.g. relax with a book, listen to music or take a bath. This can help serve as a signal that your body is ready for sleep.
- Avoid stressful or stimulating activity before bed.
- Keep the bedroom as cool as possible – people sleep better in cooler environments (around 18 degrees C).
- Avoid alcohol or nicotine in the hour or two before sleep. Alcohol might cause initial drowsiness but can cause intermittent, early waking. Nicotine is also a stimulant and may affect the time it takes to get to sleep. Avoid caffeine for up to four hours before going to bed.
- Eat a light meal before going to bed to avoid hunger. Avoid a heavy or fatty meal before bedtime as these are harder to digest.
- Avoid exercise about three hours before bedtime.
- Avoid watching TV, video games, studying, playing or working on a computer in the bedroom. If unavoidable e.g. shared accommodation, create distinct areas in the bedroom such as a desk which can be closed off or use a cupboard to store study material.
- Avoid using another person's sleeping pills.
- Keep the bedroom dark – use an eye mask, blackout blinds or heavy curtains (or even a thick blanket) on your bedroom window. It can get very light in the early mornings during British summertime.
- Avoid forcing sleep; sleep is a passive process. If after thirty minutes sleep is not achieved it is useful to get up and engage in an activity to distract from lack of sleep e.g. listening to soothing music.
- Avoid falling to sleep on the sofa.
- Keep the bedroom quiet and use ear plugs if necessary. Avoid clock watching; watching the clock can increase anxiety about length of sleep. If it is necessary to set an alarm, turn the clock away from sight.

Sleep during the daytime:

- Turn off mobile phones, disconnect landlines and consider putting up a 'do not disturb' notice on the bedroom door.
- Blackout blinds or thick curtains can really help reduce daytime light, while using ear plugs can reduce noise; background 'white noise' also helps some people.
- Ask family and friends at home to make sure it is a peaceful place during the day.
- Consider speaking to neighbours about working nights.
- Allow some time to unwind when returning home after a night shift (as after a day shift).
- Try not to panic: if sleep is evasive, follow the sleep hygiene strategies above.

Preparing for the first night:

- It is recommended that shift workers get extra sleep before working the first night shift to reduce sleep debt.
- If sleep is poor before the first night shift, a period of wakefulness could exceed 24 hours or more.
- A longer lie in to at least midday the morning before starting is recommended, as is a late afternoon nap of at least two hours or more to reduce the build-up of fatigue on the night shift.

Strategies to adopt during the shift:

- Some people find it good to eat their main meal before going onto the shift and having a lunch half way through their shift and another light meal when they get home, while others prefer to take lots of healthy snacks to eat.
- Eating small amounts and often throughout the night will help keep your energy levels up. Find out what works best for you but avoid a heavy meal before going to sleep.
- Keep moving during your shift – if you do have any downtime then walk about and stretch.
- Keep hydrated but don't drink too much caffeine – avoid caffeine towards the end of your shift as it can hinder sleep when you get home. The effects of a cup of coffee can start being felt within as little as 20 minutes and may last up to three or four hours depending on the strength of the drink and your individual tolerance. Too much coffee can also irritate the gastric system and have a diuretic affect. Remember it is not only coffee that contains caffeine; cola drinks, tea and some over-the counter pain killers or cold remedies can also contain caffeine.
- Chat to co-workers – during down time keep your mind active by chatting to colleagues.

Circadian Nadir:

- This is the time when the natural body clock is at its lowest between 3am and 6am. Night workers often associate this time with feeling cold, shaky and nauseous, as well as sleepy/drowsy.
- This is a normal reaction and the body is programmed to be least active at this time and it can be difficult to stay awake especially if the work demands are low.
- Eat or drink something warm (avoiding caffeine too late in the shift) during this period and try to keep busy.

Getting home safely:

- The end of a night shift is recognised as a high-risk period for car accidents – particularly towards the end of a few back-to-back shifts. If you are dependent on a car to get you to and from work then be vigilant to the risks of fatigue.
- If you do feel yourself falling asleep at the wheel – pull off the road if it is safe to do so and have a short nap.
- Avoid driving for a long period or a long distance after a period of night shifts or long working hours. While it may be tempting to travel directly to visit family and friends and spend your days off with them, it would be advisable to have a rest or sleep first and travel later in the day.
- If you can, it may be better to use public transport or consider lift sharing with other students. Not only will this help reduce travel costs, it will also help keep you alert if someone else is in the car.
- If you are starting or finishing work late at night make sure you can park your car in a secure and well-lit area.
- If you have concerns about your personal safety when travelling to and from work on a night shift or any unsocial hour, speak to your Practice Supervisor/ PEF and Academic Advisor.

Changing from night to day shifts:

- Adjusting back to days can be difficult and it is important that your shift pattern allows enough time to recover from night shift work before going onto the next shift.
- Have a short sleep when you get home from your last shift to get over some fatigue.
- Try and do normal daytime activities when you wake up and go to bed at your regular time that night to get back into a routine.

Looking after your health:

In addition to the tips for surviving the night shift and getting good sleep, it is important to try and look after your general health as shift workers can be more susceptible to illness and poor health:

- **Psychosocial health** – working shifts that differ from family and friends can leave you feeling isolated. It is important to try and continue as much of a social and family life as possible and not to neglect your relationships.
 - ✓ Make your family and friends aware of your shift schedule so that they can include you when planning social activities.
 - ✓ Make the most of your time off – plan meal times, weekends and evenings together.
 - ✓ Invite others who work similar shifts to join you in social activities when others are at work and there are fewer crowds.
- **Healthy lifestyles** – shift workers can be more at risk from gastrointestinal complaints, diabetes and cardiovascular problems so a healthy diet and regular exercise are important. Lack of access to healthy foods during shift times or a lack of rest breaks can make this a challenge and employers also need to do more to support shift workers in making healthy lifestyle choices. Finding the time and motivation to exercise can be a challenge for shift workers but exercise can improve cardiovascular as well as mental health. Smoking can also increase the risk of heart disease and other health conditions in shift workers.
- **Use of stimulants/sedatives** – shift workers often use stimulants such as coffee, cigarettes, high energy drinks to keep them awake and alcohol or sleeping pills to help them sleep. However the effects of both stimulants and sedatives are only short term and can lead to the risk of dependence, addiction and physical health problems. Avoid depending on stimulants and sedatives as a long-term strategy for dealing with shift work. If you are following good sleep hygiene routines and are still having difficulties staying awake or going off to sleep, seek medical advice.

References

Nursing and Midwifery Council (2018): *The Code: Professional standards of practice and behaviour for nurses and midwives*: London, NMC.

Royal College of Nursing (2012): *A Shift in the Right Direction*: London, RCN.

Additional Resources

Due to the significant changes related to the COVID-19 Pandemic, please access the COVID-19 Gateway Student and Staff Resources: Health and Well-being for further information.