

PARTNERS FOR BETTER HEALTH CARE

(One nurse's journey to Certification)

I can easily recall my first impressions of working as a lone I/DD nurse overseeing the health programs of 25 adults with very different intellectual and developmental disabilities. I remember being terribly fascinated with the disproportionately high number of medical diagnoses, co-morbidities and pathologies affecting this small community of people. There were genetic conditions that I had never encountered in nearly 30 years of nursing. I knew next to nothing about the management of seizures and psychiatric illness. I did not even know other nurses who worked in this field of diverse and complex health issues. I asked myself: where does one begin to establish a quality health program? It has taken me six years of working in the I/DD field, but I now know where to begin. If you enjoy this field of nursing and desire to pursue excellence, I recommend that you become a Certified Developmental Disabilities Nurse (CDDN). The purpose of this article is to encourage you to take that leap; to make the decision to start the CDDN quest as I did in January 2009. I guarantee, with the DDNA as your partner, your nursing practice will improve.

Before I share with you my simple program for success with the certification process, I would like to relate that the most important benefit I have realized in the pursuit of certification has been the development of self-confidence. Allow me to explain. Now, as a CDDN nurse, I finally feel like I am “qualified” in this area of nursing that alternately intrigues, delights and intimidates me. Many of my old suspicions have been replaced with confident knowledge. I used to wonder if the frequently occurring health issues that I encountered, like constipation, osteoporosis, GERD, and cerumen impactions, were somehow associated with intellectual and developmental disabilities. And indeed, I learned these are common co-morbidities. Now I understand much better that people with I/DD are at higher risk for a host of health problems affecting every bodily system. As I studied for the exam, my confidence

increased. In turn, I was inspired to share my new-found knowledge with co-workers, guardians and other members of the habilitative and health teams. In my six years in this field I have come to the conclusion that there is a tremendous need for nursing excellence. I truly believe the investment that we nurses make in professional self-improvement will have a wonderful ripple effect in this vulnerable and often underserved population.

The one key element that contributed to my success in achieving certification after only seven months of focused study was making the acquaintance of another RN with a strong record of success in the same field of I/DD nursing. Remarkably we lived in the same small town. We shared common beliefs that our work as I/DD nurses was both vital for our clients and medically-- astoundingly interesting. We commiserated about how difficult it was to find solid guidelines to assist us in structuring top-notch health programs. My new colleague encouraged me to join the DDNA, and together we found in this organization a trove of resources for isolated nurses like ourselves. We soon made a pact that we would seek certification in 2009 by meeting every Friday morning for about 2 hours. Working with a partner, I knew, would make this project easier and the experience richer.

If you are interested in certification the formula for success is simple—go to the DDNA website and click on the “certification” tab. Take the time to read through the six steps regarding “How to Become Certified.” Make sure you agree with the goals and standards of the DDNA and determine if you are qualified to pursue certification. Someone at the DDNA is always there to answer any questions that may arise. Then, I suggest you hone in on section five regarding ‘studying for the exam.’ My study partner and I chose to buy the four books that were recommended. We developed a strategy to go through every chapter of each book together in our weekly meetings. In preparation for each meeting we would read two to four chapters of a chosen book for homework. When we met we discussed our impressions, any surprising findings and how the material in the chapters related to our particular

practices. Early on we decided to take turns writing up condensed notes about each of the chapters. These would become study aids for us to refer to as we moved into the final phase of preparation for the exam. We rarely missed our weekly meeting despite the realities of work and family obligations.

In addition to reading the four books, the website suggested it was helpful preparation to review the free online courses for members, available through the DDNA website. Each of us chose courses from the ample list of possibilities to study independently. We gave each other reports at our weekly meeting about the online courses; commenting on what we found helpful and how it might impact our practice of nursing.

As the weeks passed, we both faithfully read the DDNA newsletters and thus found information about the approaching DDNA conference in May. Many of the educational topics to be offered sounded interesting but we found the description of the session, to prepare nurses for the certification exam, to be compelling. To make a long story short, we spoke to our respective bosses and with their support, attended the 2009 DDNA conference. We returned home with even more knowledge and enthusiasm to achieve our goal of certification. We both bought a book at the conference entitled Drugs and Disabilities by Karen Green McGowan, RN, CDDN, as an additional pharmacological reference for our study program. We found an invaluable network support at the conference in our nursing colleagues.

At a study session in late June, we realized that the recommended books and the pharmacological reference had been read and many of the courses at the DDNA website were successfully reviewed. Our next step was to enact Section Three of "How to Become Certified," that is to "apply for certification." All of the requested documentation was mailed to the DDNA as clearly stipulated on the website. Within a short time each of our applications was approved. Study sessions were now spent reviewing the condensed notes on seizures and seizure management, genetic and chromosomal conditions and medication management. Plans were then made to sit the exam at a

testing center close to home. Information about this can be found in section six called “taking the exam.”

The big day arrived! I sat at the computer with my heart pounding and took one question at a time. There were no trick questions. I was confident about some answers, while others I struggled between two seemingly good choices. There were some hard questions. To answer them, I relied on my experience as an I/DD nurse.

Much to my relief, I learned that I passed the test a few weeks later with an e-mail message from the Executive Director of the DDNA. I am honored to carry the title of CDDN behind my name and to uphold the standards of the DDNA. I look forward to making a difference with the small community of people whom I serve. I also want to inspire other nurses to join the DDNA in building better health care for all people with developmental disabilities. Just remember: most goals are more easily accomplished and more enjoyable when you have a great partner.

Respectfully submitted:

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