

Nurse Manager interview questions

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What to expect

Nurse Manager interviews combine clinical leadership, operational management and people skills. You will be asked about rostering, budgets, safety and quality, and how you handle difficult staffing or performance situations. Expect a mix of process questions, behavioural questions and realistic scenarios.

- **Process:** Questions that ask you to walk through how you handle routine management tasks such as rostering, budget monitoring or recruitment.
- **Behavioural:** Questions that ask for a specific example from your past experience, often about staffing shortages, conflict or change management.
- **Scenario:** Hypothetical situations that test your judgement under pressure, such as a rise in medication errors or a patient safety incident.
- **Technical and regulatory:** Questions about clinical governance, the National Safety and Quality Health Service Standards, AHPRA requirements and accreditation readiness.
- **People leadership:** Questions about managing underperformance, building team culture, and supporting staff through change or stress.

Usually a two-stage process. First, a panel interview with the Director of Nursing, a senior nurse manager and a HR representative. This covers your management approach, examples from your experience and scenario questions. If you progress, a second interview or informal meeting with the executive team or key stakeholders. Some organisations include a short presentation on a quality improvement topic or a ward budget challenge.

1. Walk me through how you approach rostering a nursing team across a busy seven-day roster.

Why they ask

This tests your operational planning, knowledge of skill mix and ability to balance safe staffing with staff preferences and budget.

How to structure your answer

Give a step-by-step walk-through: gather information, assess acuity, build the roster, check compliance, seek feedback, publish and monitor.

Example answer

"First I review the previous roster and any leave requests. Then I look at patient acuity and bed numbers for the coming fortnight, because that tells me what skill mix I need. I build the roster in RosterOn or Kronos, starting with permanent staff and then filling gaps with part-time and casual nurses who have the right competencies. I check that we have the right number of senior nurses on each shift and that no one is working unsafe consecutive shifts. I send a draft to the team for feedback before publishing it, and I keep a daily view of sick leave so I can adjust quickly."

2. Tell me about a time you had to manage a significant staffing shortage or unexpected absence on your ward.

Why they ask

This assesses your ability to stay calm under pressure, think on your feet and use your networks to keep patients safe.

How to structure your answer

Use STAR: Situation, Task, Action, Result. Focus on the specific actions you took and the outcome for patients and staff.

Example answer

"We had three nurses call in sick on a Friday night shift, and we were already short. I came in myself to cover the first four hours while I called our casual pool and asked two part-time staff if they could do a double shift with a break. I also spoke to the medical team to prioritise discharges so we could reduce the number of patients on the ward. By 9pm we had safe staffing, and I stayed until handover to make sure the night team was settled. I followed up with the sick staff the next day and reviewed our on-call list to avoid the same gap."

3. You notice a gradual increase in medication errors on your unit. How would you investigate and address this?

Why they ask

This tests your clinical governance knowledge, your approach to risk and your ability to lead quality improvement without blaming individuals.

How to structure your answer

Show a systematic approach: gather data, identify patterns, consult staff, review policy, implement changes, audit and report.

Example answer

"First I would pull the incident reports and look at the pattern: which medications, which times, which staff. Then I would meet with the clinical nurse educators to review the medication administration policy and check if any recent changes to the drug chart or dispensing system have contributed. I would organise a refresher session on high-risk medications and introduce a second-check process for those drugs. I would also audit compliance weekly for a month and report back to the quality committee. If it was a system issue, like look-alike packaging, I would escalate to pharmacy."

4. How do you ensure your ward remains compliant with the National Safety and Quality Health Service Standards?

Why they ask

This checks your understanding of the Australian accreditation framework and your ability to embed safety and quality into daily practice.

How to structure your answer

Explain your framework, then give specific examples of how you monitor, educate and report on compliance.

Example answer

"I use the NSQHS Standards as a framework. I keep a calendar of self-assessments for each standard, and I assign a clinical nurse to lead each one. We review incidents, audits and patient feedback at monthly governance meetings. I make sure all staff complete mandatory training, and I do regular walk-arounds to check that hand hygiene, medication safety and falls prevention are actually happening. Before accreditation, I run a mock survey with the team so everyone knows what to expect. I also report progress to the executive team each quarter."

5. Describe your approach to managing a staff member whose performance or conduct is below standard.

Why they ask

This explores your people leadership, fairness and knowledge of performance management processes.

How to structure your answer

Outline a structured, supportive approach: gather evidence, have a private conversation, agree on a plan, document and review.

Example answer

"I start by gathering evidence: rosters, incident reports, patient feedback, and any previous conversations. I meet with the staff member privately and explain the specific concern, with examples. I ask for their perspective and whether there is anything affecting their work. We agree on a plan with clear expectations and a review date. I document everything and offer support like training or an employee assistance program. If performance does not improve, I follow the organisation's performance management policy, involving HR. I keep it fair and consistent."

6. How would you manage a ward budget that is trending over budget halfway through the financial year?

Why they ask

This assesses your financial acumen, ability to prioritise and willingness to communicate openly with your team and executives.

How to structure your answer

Show a logical approach: analyse overspent lines, understand drivers, consult finance and staff, develop a recovery plan, monitor and report.

Example answer

"First I would look at the budget lines that are overspent: agency staff, consumables, overtime. I would meet with the finance business partner to understand the drivers. If it is agency, I would review our recruitment pipeline and see if we can convert casual staff to permanent. If it is consumables, I would check for waste or incorrect ordering. I would talk to the team about the pressure and ask for their ideas. I would then put a recovery plan to the director of nursing, with realistic actions. I would monitor weekly and report back."