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The reasons students choose to undertake a nursing degree



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Summary

Background: Determining the reasons people choose to study nursing may help educators and managers develop student-focused and enticing nursing programmes. In Australia, little research has been undertaken with students entering nursing programmes and the reasons for their choice.

Objectives: The aim of this study was to determine why new students choose to enter nursing at university.

Design: A descriptive survey design.

Setting: An urban university in Sydney, Australia.

Participants: Undergraduate nursing students at the beginning of their first year of study.

Method: An open-ended question relating to the reasons for students' choice of a nursing programme was included in the survey. The transcribed textual data were content analysed for words related to the students' choice.

Results: The students' reasons for entering nursing programmes were both personal and career related, with personal being more dominant. The reasons to start nursing were: being able to help and care for people, job security, the ability to enter tertiary education and the enjoyment or love of nursing.

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Conclusions: Nursing remains a career of choice for young and mature students entering university. It is seen to provide security, interest and opportunity to help and care for others. Universities must focus on this as they develop programmes for a generation where multiple changes of career appear inevitable during their lifetime. The nursing profession needs to look at career pathways after graduation that provide these challenges within nursing itself.

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Introduction

Choosing to work as a nurse has been researched in a number of studies across the world. These studies include journal editorial comment (Mimura, Griffiths, & Norman, 2009) extensive literature review analysis (Duvall & Andrews, 2010; Matutina, Newman, & Jenkins, 2010; Price, 2009a, 2009b), views of high school students (Cohen, Palumbo, Rambur, & Mongeon, 2004; Law & Arthur, 2003; Matutina et al., 2010; Neilson & Jones, 2012; Neilson & Lauder, 2008; Neilson & McNally, 2012), entering and continuing students in nursing programmes at colleges or universities (Grainger & Bolan, 2006; Miers, Rickaby, & Pollard, 2007; Roberts & Ward-Smith, 2010; Williams, Wertenberger, & Gushuliak, 1997) and the influence of family members and others on prospective students in nursing choices (Neilson & Jones, 2012). The most common motivating reason these studies have been undertaken is to develop frameworks and strategies to attract students into nursing.

The need for nurses is growing with the ever increasing ageing population in the western world (Franklin et al., 2011) and the approaching retirement of a major part of the nursing workforce in these countries who are aged over 45 years (Hill, 2011). However, Duvall and Andrews (2010) conducted a structured literature review of 44 qualitative and quantitative studies in the United States of America and found that the nursing shortage was not related to recruitment of students into programmes, but rather workplace issues such as job stress, management issues and failure to nurture new nurses. Other factors included education issues such as a lack of qualified facilitators and clinical sites to allow more students to be admitted into programmes.

In Australia, the most recent studies have been sourced using quantitative surveys or the recollections of registered nurses and their ideas of why they chose nursing as a career (Duffield, O'Brien-Pallas, & Aitken, 2004; McCabe, Nowak, & Mullen, 2005). Few Australian studies have examined beginning students in university programmes. Eley, Eley, and Rogers-Clark (2010) found that the main reasons for students entering nursing programmes in regional Australia were altruistic, vocational and interest as well as considering nursing as a career where one could progress up the promotion ladder. This current paper provides a qualitative view from students entering nursing as to why they choose to study nursing at university.

Background

Much of the research on nursing career choice has been geared to high school populations who are often seen as the future of nursing. On a review of 10 measurement instruments used in this setting Matutina et al. (2010) found that 80% of participants were female, with no socioeconomic

status identified, and in most cases no extended validity analysis completed. However, the findings from the studies in this area do provide a range of reasons as to why people choose nursing. The major reasons for choosing nursing emanating from these studies are that students want a secure, stable and respected career with many varied opportunities (Beck, 2000; Law & Arthur, 2003). However, Cohen et al. (2004) found that there was an emphasis on the fact that nursing was not attractive because of the type of work nurses do, the lack of decision-making opportunities and earning less money than what would be an ideal career.

Other reasons that influenced student choice included personal reasons and ideals – often defined as altruistic reasons of what they can do for others as nurses (care, help, make well, contribute to society and community) (Buerhaus, Donelan, Norman, & Dittus, 2005; Law & Arthur, 2003; Neilson & McNally, 2012). These reasons for nursing as the chosen path are reflected in most of the studies from high school students. While some students are influenced by family and/or significant others (Cohen et al., 2004; Law & Arthur, 2003). Other students' significant others can deter them from choosing nursing (Neilson & Jones, 2012). Beck (2000) also found that knowing someone in nursing which could include a relative influenced choosing nursing as a career.

A meta-analysis of ten primary qualitative studies related to professional and career choice in nursing using undergraduate students (three studies) and registered nurses as samples, found that career choice was influenced by beliefs and ideals about nursing including the caring compassionate nurse (MacIntosh, 2003). There were also studies that examined personal self-concept and concluded that often those people entering nursing have lower self-concept and social positioning than those in other careers (Dombeck, 2003; MacIntosh, 2003; Mimura et al., 2009).

Studies of entering and ongoing students in nursing programmes have, in the main, used quantitative measures and highlight many of the reasons for choice that are seen in high school students discussed above. Again, they can be seen as personal (altruistic) beliefs of what nursing will be like (caring and helping people), nursing as a good lucrative, interesting, respected career with broad opportunities; and as a stepping stone to another career such as medicine. In a quantitative study of students in nursing programmes before and after a strategic national campaign in the USA Buerhaus et al. (2005) found that prior to the campaign 90% of the participants felt nursing was a good career choice for students with high academic ability, those good in science, and 50% agreed it was a good career if one wanted respect and a secure job. Others in the study voiced a desire to be a nurse since childhood. Similarly, 9% of the students in a Canadian study stated it had been a lifelong dream to be a nurse (Williams et al., 1997). This is contrary to the

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