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A cross-sectional view of Australian undergraduate nurses' perceptions of working with older people

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Summary The aim of this study was to understand undergraduate nurses' perceptions of working with older people. This important issue has implications for stakeholders such as the nursing profession, educators, aged care providers and governments concerned about who is going to care for the increasing population of older people. Thirty-one Australian Universities that offered undergraduate nursing programmes were invited to participate in this cross-sectional study. A convenience sample of undergraduate nurses ($N=886$) from eight universities participated. The Students' Perceptions of Working with Older People questionnaire measured perceptions of working with older people in general, personal disposition towards or intention to work with older people and perceptions of the consequences of working with older people. When the students' perceptions of working with older people in general were measured, students agreed that it is mainly about basic care. On the other hand, they indicated that working with older people is challenging, interesting and stimulating. In relation to a disposition towards or intention to work with older people they were ambivalent about their first clinical placement and were non-committal about working with older people when they qualified. This topic is relevant because the link between perceptions of working with older people and exposure to older people during undergraduate study warrants a great deal of attention as all nurses will need to understand older people and the care they need.

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1. Introduction

The rapid ageing of Australia's population has major social and economic implications for the nation and the health workforce. The [Australian Institute of Health and Welfare \(AIHW\) \(2013\)](#) reported that in Australia in 2012, there were 3.2 million people aged 65 years and over (15.9% of the

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population) and 423,700 aged 85 years and over, and that by 2036, 6.3 million will be over 65 years of age (24% of the total population). The AIHW (2013) also reported that Australians have one of the highest life expectancies in the world, where a man aged 65 years in 2009–2011 can expect to live another 19.1 years whereas for a woman it is 22 years. This longevity means the number of older Australians with disability will increase over coming decades. The AIHW (2013) reported that 54% of older Australians have a disability and 20% sometimes or always needed assistance with self-care, mobility or communication. In 2011, Australians over 65 years of age accounted for 39% of hospitalizations, 48% of patient days in public hospitals, 68% of patients receiving specialist palliative services and 74% of general practice palliative care-related encounters AIHW (2013). Such population statistics signify that there will be an increasing use of the health care system by older people with a consequential demand for a competent and caring workforce.

Alongside this growth of the ageing population, its associated high prevalence of chronic and degenerative diseases and unprecedented demands on the health care system, is a registered nurse shortage (Health Workforce Australia, 2013; King et al., 2012). The implications of this shortage are amplified in the aged care system, which has great difficulties in attracting and retaining nurses (Productivity Commission, 2011). The National Aged Care Workforce Census and Survey 2012 (King et al., 2012) provided detailed information about the workforce, including registered nurses (RNs), that delivered care to older Australians in both residential and community care. Since 2007, although RN vacancies in residential aged care facilities were quicker to fill, the vacancy rate had increased for residential care and was difficult to fill in community care. Additionally, RNs reported that they worked more hours than they wanted to and had higher work-life interference rate than the Australian workforce more generally. Registered nurses felt under pressure, stressed, were more likely to have been in their current job for 12 months or less and expected not to be working for their current organisation in 12 months (King et al., 2012). Another factor to influence the dearth of nurses working in the aged care system is undergraduate education where aged care is not seen as a desirable career option (Neville, Dickie, & Goetz, 2014). One area identified for closer examination to counter the undesirability of aged care is the perceptions undergraduate nurses hold towards working with older people (Nolan, Brown, Davies, Nolan, & Keady, 2006). Nolan et al. (2006) decided that instead of examining student attitudes to older people which are generally positive, it would be more worthwhile to examine students' perceptions of working with older people. If negative perceptions towards working with older people are held by undergraduate nurses this can affect career choice as well as the quality of care delivered to older people in any part of the health care system (Flood & Clark, 2009).

There have been numerous studies about undergraduate nurse attitudes, perspectives and perceptions towards older people (Koh, 2012; Liu, Norman, & While, 2013; Neville & Dickie, 2014). For the purpose of this paper these concepts are defined and explained as follows. Attitude is the learned, relatively stable tendency to respond to

people, concepts, and events in an evaluative way (Gerrig & Zimbardo, 2002). Culture, age, gender, education, experience and previous relationships with older people have been identified as some of the factors to influence undergraduate nurse attitudes to older people (Lambrinou, Sourtzi, Kalokerinou, & Lemonidou, 2009). Perspective is a particular attitude towards something; a way of thinking about something (Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary, 2014). Undergraduate nurse perspectives were found to be influenced by older people being seen as mentally and physically dependent and long term care for older people perceived as uninteresting, boring, unpleasant, or frustrating (Flood & Clark, 2009). Perception relates to the processes that organise information in the sensory image and interpret it as having been produced by properties of objects or events in the external, three-dimensional world (Gerrig & Zimbardo, 2002). The perceptions of older people held by undergraduate nurses were found to be determined by the cultural environment whereby acute and technologically-driven care has a higher status than long term care; an aged care system that is under-resourced and unattractive as a career option; and the limited amount of gerontological content in nursing education programmes (Holroyd, Dahlke, Fehr, Jung, & Hunter, 2009).

Within three recent reviews (Koh, 2012; Liu et al., 2013; Neville & Dickie, 2014), only two studies examined undergraduate nurses' perceptions of working with older people (Nolan et al., 2006; Pan, Edwards, & Chang, 2009). Both Nolan et al. (2006) and Pan et al. (2009) used the Students' Perceptions of Working with Older People questionnaire to measure students' perceptions. Nolan et al. (2006) used a longitudinal, mixed methods study with a convenience sample of first and second year undergraduate nurses ($n=718$) from four universities in the United Kingdom to establish that positive perceptions of working with older people were evident. Pan et al. (2009) studied 362 Taiwanese undergraduate nurses in their first and third years of study. Overall, the Taiwanese students had positive perceptions of working with older people. An intention to work with this population and female gender were the influencing factors to inform this finding. Both studies emphasised that despite the positive nature of their findings there is always room for continual maintenance and improvement in student perceptions and the responsibility for this was within nursing education. Nolan et al. (2006) focused particularly on better clinical placement experiences to counter the influence of ageism and poor quality care. Among many recommendations, clinical placements could be improved by comprehensive orientation, mentorship, team work and a positive shared culture and vision. The aim of this study was to determine the perceptions of working with older people held by undergraduate nurses in Australian universities and which factors are likely to predict their perceptions of working with older people.

2. Method

2.1. Data collection

This cross-sectional study involved a convenience sample of undergraduate nurses from all Australian universities that offered an undergraduate nursing programme. Ethical

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