



Learning and teaching in clinical practice

Clinical instructors' knowledge and perceptions about nursing care of older people: A pilot study

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ABSTRACT

With an aging population, the majority of nurses will spend their careers working with older people. Currently, there is scant research about clinical instructors' knowledge and perceptions about nursing care of older people despite their instrumental role in preparing nurses for practice. The purpose of this study was to explore clinical instructors' knowledge and perceptions about nursing care of older people. A mixed methods approach was used. Fifteen clinical instructors and 15 nurse educators employed on specialized units for older people completed questionnaires. Independent *t*-tests were administered. Five of the clinical instructors also participated in semi-structured interviews, which were analyzed using thematic analysis. Findings indicated that clinical instructors had significantly lower scores on knowledge and perceptions about nursing care of older people than practice-based nurse educators. Further, clinical instructors found it difficult to integrate specialized knowledge about nursing care of older people along with other aspects of their teaching. They also reported that it was challenging to support learning about best practices for older people within the current clinical context, which was complex and fast-paced. This study reinforces the need for professional development opportunities for clinical instructors to support their instrumental role in preparing students for practice with older people.

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Introduction

As the population of older people increases worldwide (World Health Organization, 2007) and individuals experience the health challenges of aging (Barakzai and Fraser, 2008; Hickman et al., 2007), we need to ensure that graduating nurses are well prepared to provide appropriate care for them. A growing body of international literature suggests that pre-licensure nursing programs have not kept pace with this demographic shift and do not include adequate content about nursing care of older people (Deschodt et al., 2010; Gilje et al., 2007; Hirst et al., 2012; Xiao et al., 2008). Further, nursing students are often placed in clinical environments where negative attitudes and practices towards older people are prevalent (Ironside et al., 2010). This issue deserves attention as nursing students' attitudes about older people can be

shaped by these experiences, which can consequently influence their behavior regarding knowledge acquisition about nursing care of older people (Wesley, 2005). Hence, faculty in pre-licensure nursing programs, including clinical faculty, need to be responsive to changing demographics and should examine their own knowledge and perceptions about nursing care of older people to ensure students are receiving appropriate support in their learning about this population.

Background

Several scholars have suggested that faculty's positive attitudes towards nursing care of older people lead to improvements in students' attitudes (Burbank et al., 2006; Plowfield et al., 2006). Importantly, researchers have indicated that students' experiences with clinical instructors (i.e. faculty who provide instruction in clinical placements) play a key role in shaping students' professional values (Benner et al., 2010; Haigh and Johnson, 2007). Yet, scant research has described clinical instructors' knowledge and perceptions about nursing care of older people, despite their integral role in educating new nurses.

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Numerous studies have explored the successes and challenges of incorporating nursing care of older people into undergraduate curricula (Blais et al., 2006; Burbank et al., 2006; Plowfield et al., 2006; Potter et al., 2013). A common theme shared among these studies is the importance of increasing faculty members' capacities in this area of nursing through education. Challenges to increasing faculty knowledge include: the negative image of nursing care of older people (Deschodt et al., 2010; Flood and Clark, 2009; Ironside et al., 2010), an already overloaded curriculum (Deschodt et al., 2010), and perceptions that caring for older people is simple (Xiao et al., 2008).

Clinical experiences are regarded as foundational to nursing education and play an important role in students' socialization into the nursing profession (Benner et al., 2010). Studies examining the influence of clinical experiences on students' perceptions of older people reveal complex relationships among the clinical setting (Flood and Clark, 2009; Ironside et al., 2010; Xiao et al., 2008), students' knowledge and skill level (Ironside et al., 2010) and level of faculty involvement (Burbank et al., 2006; Plowfield et al., 2006). Not surprisingly, many studies have found that students and practicing nurses share negative perceptions of older people nursing (Berntsen and Bjork, 2010; Marshall, 2010).

Although long-term care facilities are commonly used as teaching sites for nursing students, studies have suggested that when this is their first clinical experience, students are left with the impression that nursing care of older people is simplistic (Holroyd et al., 2009; Ironside et al., 2010). Using this setting to teach students how to provide "basic" care undermines the complexity of residents' health challenges and also leaves students working with few Registered Nurses (Robinson et al., 2007; Xiao et al., 2008). These clinical experiences have the potential to leave students with negative impressions of older-people nursing.

Nursing students often identify a preference to work in acute care areas with a high degree of technological involvement, which are usually found in hospital settings (Koh, 2012). Hospital-based clinical experiences, however, typically do not focus on the unique needs of older people, but rather on the diseases they are experiencing, and these experiences may perpetuate negative perceptions of older people (Ironside et al., 2010). As well, students may observe situations in which nurses and clinical faculty treat older people in a patronizing and infantilizing manner (McLafferty and Morrison, 2004). Further, Brown et al. (2008) suggested that students reported having had negative experiences on units with poor standards of care for older people, often related to an inappropriate physical environment, poor staffing levels, a lack of equipment, and a lack of education for unit staff.

Despite these challenges, research has shown that nursing students' attitudes toward older people can be positively influenced by faculty, especially clinical instructors. Many studies have demonstrated a strong correlation between clinical instructors' positive attitudes toward older people and nursing students' positive perceptions of older people nursing (Burbank et al., 2006; Cozort, 2008; McLafferty et al., 2010). Other studies have indicated that a combination of content about older people nursing and positive practice experiences, have a positive influence on students' perceptions of older people (Dahlke and Fehr, 2010).

In sum, previous research has suggested that clinical instructors have the potential to positively influence students' knowledge and perceptions about nursing care of older people, even in challenging clinical situations. With a growing number of older people accessing care and with older people becoming the majority of the patient population across healthcare settings, it is important that clinical instructors be supported in their efforts to integrate nursing care of older people into their teaching, even in

areas that may not have traditionally focused on this population (e.g., acute medical/surgical placements, critical care, home-based care). To date, little research has examined clinical instructors' knowledge and perceptions about nursing care of older people or the types of professional development they need in this area.

The aim of this pilot study was to explore clinical instructors' knowledge and perceptions about older people and their nursing care as a first step toward developing strategies to support clinical instructors' professional development in this area of practice. In the Canadian context where this study took place, clinical instructors are faculty members who teach students in the clinical setting, building upon their learning in the classroom and putting it into real-world practice. While clinical instructors were the main group of interest in this pilot study, in order to assess their knowledge and perceptions with a comparable group, we also included nurse educators in the questionnaire component of the study. Nurse educators were based in specialized older people clinical settings and had responsibility for providing education for unit staff (e.g. Registered Nurses, care attendants) about older people nursing. Hence, the clinical instructors and nurse educators had similar responsibilities in terms of providing education about older people nursing and therefore the nurse educators were an appropriate group for comparison of knowledge and perceptions about older people nursing.

The research questions associated with the study aim were:

- (1) Are there differences between clinical instructors and nurse educators in relation to their: (a) knowledge about older people; (b) knowledge about nursing care of older people; and (c) perceptions about nursing care of older people?
- (2) What facilitates and constrains clinical instructors' teaching about older-people nursing?
- (3) What professional development strategies could support clinical instructors to integrate older-people nursing into their teaching?

Research design

This pilot study adopted a mixed methods approach using both quantitative and qualitative methods. Questionnaire data were used to compare knowledge and perceptions about nursing care of older people between clinical instructors and nurse educators. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with five clinical instructors.

Setting

The pilot study was conducted in British Columbia, Canada between September 2010 and September 2011. The setting was a university-based pre-licensure nursing program that in the previous year had undergone several changes, including the integration of older-people nursing with adult nursing across the curriculum. Older people nursing content that was taught in these courses included a range of topics such as: medications and older adults, care of older people with dementia, delirium, as well as common chronic illnesses (e.g. heart failure, diabetes, arthritis). Students were required to complete three clinical rotations (typically hospital-based) in the area of adult/older-people nursing during their five-semester program, with each rotation comprising groups of six to eight students per clinical instructor. Hence, the clinical instructors in the program were expected to teach students about older people nursing during these clinical rotations.

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