



Nurses' attitudes towards older people: A systematic review

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ABSTRACT

Background: The population is ageing globally. Older people are more likely to have chronic diseases and disabilities and have contact with health services. Attitudes of healthcare professionals affect the quality of care provided and individual career preferences.

Aim: To examine the international research relating to registered and student nurses' attitudes towards older people and the potential underpinning variables.

Methods: A systematic search of 8 databases covering English and Chinese language publications since 2000 was undertaken which identified 25 papers.

Findings: Reported attitudes towards older people were inconsistent with positive, negative and neutral attitudes being noted across registered and student nurses and appear to be slightly less positive since 2000. A range of variables have been examined as potential predictors of nurses' attitudes with age, gender and education level being investigated most frequently but none were consistent predictors. Preference to work with older people and knowledge of ageing appeared to be associated with positive attitudes towards older people.

Conclusions: There is a growing need for registered nurses committed to working with older people, however, there is a dearth of well designed studies which investigate both the attitudes of registered and student nurses and the associated factors, and test interventions to inform workforce strategies.

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What is already known about the topic?

- The ageing population with their increasing functional dependency is one of the most challenging problems of contemporary societies which has a direct effect upon global public health and social care systems and increasing the demands for nursing care.
- Negative attitudes towards older people and myths of ageing are ubiquitous. Older adults are viewed as a nurse's burden and an obstacle to the more important work of caring for younger adults.
- There is no previous systematic review of nurses' attitudes towards older people and related variables

despite the importance of the topic and the increasing global migration of nurses.

What this paper adds

- This review synthesizes the international research published in the English and Chinese language journals relating to registered and student nurses' attitudes towards older people and the potential underpinning variables.
- Registered and student nurses' attitudes appear inconsistent and slightly less positive since 2000. Preference to work with older people and knowledge of ageing appeared to be the most consistent variables associated with positive attitudes towards older people.
- The review highlights the need for more well designed studies to investigate both the attitudes of registered and

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student nurses and the associated factors, and trials of interventions to improve attitudes to inform workforce strategies.

1. Introduction

The number of people in the world aged 65 years and over is increasing at an average of 870,000 each month (Kinsella and He, 2009). Europe is the “greyest” continent with 23 of the world’s 25 countries with the oldest populations (Office for National Statistics, 2010). In 1995 more than 60% (590 million) older people lived in developing countries and this distribution is expected to increase to 70% (1.2 billion) by the year 2025 (WHO, 2000) with 81% of the world’s net gain of older people occurring in developing countries (Kinsella and He, 2009) in part reflecting demographic changes and reductions in communicable disease mortality (United Nations, 2012). In the People’s Republic of China, for example, the percentage of the population aged 60 years and over increased from 10.5% in 2000 to 14.0% in 2009 (China Statistical Yearbook, 2010) with similar increases anticipated in other developing countries (WHO, 2008).

The ageing population is one of the most challenging problems of contemporary societies which has a direct effect upon public health and social care systems (Muangpaisana et al., 2008). Indeed the rising age dependency ratio both reduces the numbers entering the healthcare workforce and increases healthcare need. However, negative attitudes towards older people and myths of ageing are ubiquitous and, while not all negative attitudes lead to ageism (Nelson, 2005) and associated stereotyping and discrimination, negative attitudes are a precursor to ageism. Ageism often leads individuals to see older adults as unproductive, depressing and sickly, and to believe that cognitive impairment is a natural consequence of ageing (Palmore, 1999). Healthcare professionals are reported to be particularly susceptible to ageist stereotyping because of their increased exposure to ill and infirm older people (Kearney et al., 2000). Attitudes of registered nurses appear to affect the preference for working with older people as well as the quality of care offered to them (McDowell et al., 1999).

The important role of nurses in delivering care has been widely and consistently recognized (Drennan et al., 2004; Jacelon, 2002) as they are accountable for providing both physical and personal care including emotional support to older adults across settings including emotional support to older adults across settings including hospitals, long-term care facilities, and in the home (De Guzman et al., 2009). Due to changing population demographics, there is a growing worldwide need for registered nurses who are knowledgeable and committed to working with older adults in diverse settings (Plonczynski et al., 2007). However, gerontological nursing is generally not considered to be popular among nursing students and registered nurses (Happell, 2002; Söderhamn et al., 2001). Older adults are often viewed as a nurse’s burden and an obstacle to the more important work of caring for younger adults with some nurses identifying with the current societal culture which does not value older adults and finding care of confused older people frustrating (Dahlke and Phinney, 2008).

A recent UK Care Quality Commission report (Care Quality Commission, 2011) identified staff attitudes as a key variable in explaining unacceptably low care standards for older people in one in five UK hospitals. While nursing support workers provide significant levels of care to older people, registered nurses are accountable for their care delivery and ensuring the maintenance of care standards highlighting the value of understanding registered nurses’ attitudes towards older people and related variables. There are two non-systematic published reviews of nurses’ attitudes towards older people/patients covering studies from 1982 until 2005; Courtney et al. (2000) reported the literature identified by a search of CINAHL from January 1982 until December 1998 and Lovell (2006) examined the evidence of nursing students’ and health professionals’ attitudes using four scales including Kogan’s Attitude Scale (1961), Facts of Aging Quiz (Palmore, 1977), Aging Semantic Differential Scale (Rosencranz and McNevin, 1969) and Maxwell–Sullivan Attitude Scale (1980) identified from searches of Medline and CINAHL 1990–2005. This review therefore aimed to systematically examine the international research relating to registered and student nurses’ attitudes towards older people and the potential underpinning variables including knowledge, experience and self-ageing over the last decade as reported in the English and Chinese language journals reflecting both China’s emergence as an important exporter of nurses to developed countries (Fang, 2007) and the large healthcare literature located in Chinese language journals.

2. Methods

2.1. Study identification and selection

Both electronic and manual searches were conducted to identify all published research studies focusing on the health professionals’ attitudes toward older people. The search was completed in May 2011 and was restricted to papers published since 2000. The following databases were broadly scanned prior to more refined electronic searches: CINAHL, MEDLINE, EMBASE, British Nursing Index (BNI), PsycINFO, Chinese Biomedical database (CBM), China Medical Academic Conference (CMAC) and China Academic Journal (CAJ). To maximize the sensitivity of the search Boolean operators were used to combine the terms (‘older people’ and ‘attitude’ and ‘health professional’). Specific search terms used are listed in Table 1.

The electronic search produced 2130 references in the English language and 49 references in the Chinese language. Review of the titles and abstracts revealed 629 duplicate references, 43 were not journal papers, 1406 were not relevant (they did not report registered or student nurses’ attitudes towards older people). Further information relating to 15 papers was needed for their assessment but they were unobtainable. Sixteen papers were not written in the English or Chinese languages although their abstracts were in English. The full texts of the remaining 70 papers were retrieved and assessed for eligibility. For inclusion the following criteria were met: a report of primary research into the attitudes of registered or student nurses towards older people, in which attitudes were measured using a

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