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The value of the pre-hospital learning environment as part of the emergency nursing programme

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 12 February 2015

Accepted 8 May 2015

Available online 29 September 2015

Keywords:

Emergency nursing programme

Clinical experience

Pre-hospital environment

ABSTRACT

Background: Professional nurses enrolled in a post-basic emergency nursing programme presented at a tertiary nursing education institution in South Africa are placed in different clinical learning environments to reach the set clinical outcomes and gain appropriate clinical experience. These students are placed in the hospital environment (emergency department and critical care unit) and pre-hospital environment (road ambulance services) to ensure they gain the necessary clinical exposure in order to learn the relevant and necessary skills and knowledge which in turn will help them become safe and independent emergency nurse practitioners. Controversy about the value of placing emergency nursing students in the pre-hospital environment has raised questions from specifically the private healthcare sector. During the pre-hospital placement, emergency nursing students are absent from the hospital environment which is costly and, according to the healthcare services, unnecessary.

Objective: The study explored the views of the emergency nurse students regarding the value of rotating through the pre-hospital learning environment during an emergency nursing programme.

Methods: A qualitative, explorative, descriptive and contextual research design using an Appreciative Inquiry approach was used to collect the data. Through purposive sampling a total of 45 emergency nursing students participated. Data was collected by means of self-reported Appreciative Inquiry interview guides and individual Appreciative Inquiry interviews. The data was analysed using content analysis.

Results: Four major themes were identified: an unpredictable environment, role players in emergency medical services, team work, and competencies.

Conclusion: The research findings support the value and continuation of utilising the pre-hospital clinical learning environment for placing post-basic emergency nursing students when enrolled in the emergency nursing programme.

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Peer review under responsibility of Johannesburg University.

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.hsag.2015.05.001>

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1. Introduction and background

Essential learning opportunities assist in the development of particular competencies within the nursing profession. These opportunities are provided through clinical learning. Clinical learning is therefore regarded as a vital component of nursing programmes. In South Africa, registered professional nurses working in the emergency nursing environment can enrol for the “Medical and Surgical: Emergency Nursing” post-basic training programme presented at tertiary institutions (Brysiewicz & Bruce, 2008, p. 129). An emergency nurse practitioner can be defined as a “nurse practising in an emergency department who is specifically trained to deal with minor injuries without the need for supervision by a physician” (Medical dictionary for health professions and nursing, 2012).

The clinical experience gained during exposure to various clinical learning environments promotes the development of the necessary knowledge and skills (Chesser-Smyth, 2005, p. 320; Melby, 2000, p. 638), while planned clinical placement may enhance emergency nursing students' ability to integrate theory with practice (Edwards, Smith, Courtney, Finlayson, & Chapman, 2004, p. 249; Jackson & Mannix, 2001, p. 276). Working in the clinical environment promotes quality of learning as this setting is vital to support development towards future quality practices as registered emergency nurses (Meyer & van Niekerk, 2008, p. 65). Moreover, clinical exposure is regarded as vital for adequate basic and post-basic nursing training as students are exposed to potential learning opportunities (Jerlock, Falk, & Severinsson, 2003, p. 219; Chun-Heung & French, 1997, p. 460).

An emergency nurse programme presented at a higher education institution in South Africa focuses on particular theoretical content and related clinical exposure as prescribed by the South African Nursing Council (SANC) (R212, 1993). Clinical exposure is based on the available learning opportunities within the clinical learning environment. To comply with the curriculum of the programme, emergency nursing students need to rotate through various clinical learning environments in order to gain competencies in the emergency environment. The pre-hospital environment is in fact only one of a number of different clinical learning environments. In terms of the curriculum of the specific nursing education institution in Gauteng, South Africa, the emergency nursing students have to rotate through the pre-hospital environment for a period of eight weeks. Educators view the eight-week rotation through the pre-hospital environment as an essential clinical learning opportunity because it engenders appropriate clinical exposure.

However, the placement of emergency nursing students (who are enrolled in the emergency nursing programme) within the pre-hospital learning environment seems to be a controversial issue. During a preceptors meeting, the preceptors shared with the researcher their concern that the placement of emergency nursing students in the pre-hospital environment for eight weeks is regarded by the healthcare services as financially straining and unnecessary.

2. Problem statement

Available literature on investigations conducted by researchers on the value of emergency nursing students' experiences within the pre-hospital environment as a learning environment is scarce. It was thus essential to explore the value of the pre-hospital environment as a learning environment with the intent to provide evidence for the necessity of pre-hospital placement of emergency nursing students enrolled in the emergency nurse programme. It is vital for emergency nursing students to gain appropriate and related clinical experience, and acquire new knowledge and better rewarded skills. They need to be exposed to and work in various clinical learning environments (of which the pre-hospital learning environment is just one) because the clinical experience assists them in advancing their current knowledge and skills. When equipped with the applicable, necessary knowledge and skills the emergency nurses become increasingly specialised (Chesser-Smyth, 2005, p. 320; Melby, 2000, p. 638) which will result in better quality care and improved patient outcomes.

This study focused on exploring the value that exposure to the pre-hospital environment added to the personal and professional development of emergency nursing students. In order to maximise the emergency nursing students' clinical learning experience, the researcher believed there was a need to evaluate the experiences of emergency nursing students enrolled in the emergency nursing programme in the pre-hospital learning environment.

3. Research method and design

A qualitative, explorative, descriptive and contextual research design was employed. Data was collected from an Appreciative Inquiry stance. Appreciative Inquiry works on the assumption that there is something good within every programme and that what is good should be carried forward (Hammond, 1998, pp. 20–21). Therefore, the good within the current emergency nursing programme had to be evaluated in support of the pre-hospital rotation. According to Cooperrider, Whitney, and Stavros (2005, p. xviii), Appreciative Inquiry offers an opportunity to build stimulating and dynamic programmes. Appreciative Inquiry is based on a 5D-cycle that provides access to and mobilises the positive core that is encircled by five phases - *definition, discovery, dream, design* and *destiny* - with a central positive core (see Fig. 1).

According to Reed (2007, p. 2), Appreciative Inquiry is an inquiry that focuses on appreciating what works well within an organisation (in this case, the emergency nursing programme). Therefore, Appreciative Inquiry is a process that can be utilised to challenge the existing assumptions of an organisation (emergency nursing programme) from a positive stance, by asking questions relating to the strengths and successes of an organisation (emergency nursing programme), or a component of the organisation (programme), with the purpose of developing and implementing an improved plan for the organisation or the

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