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Review

Nursing education in China: Meeting the global demand for quality healthcare



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ABSTRACT

With a predicted global nursing shortage, ensuring the provision of quality healthcare has become a pressing concern. In China, these concerns include the need to produce nurses trained to a level to support advancing nursing practice and a healthcare system that supports the growth and retention of nurses in China.

This paper argues that the standard of nursing education in China plays a crucial role in preparing graduates to meet the health demands of China's growing population and the role that China can play into the future in the global progression of nursing. Collaboration between nursing authorities, educators, and legislators is required to support the progression of nursing worldwide.

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1. Introduction

China represents approximately one-fifth of the world's population. It is a nation with an increasing number of older residents and a severe nursing shortage [1,2]. To accommodate the growing demands for quality and accessible healthcare, China is undertaking significant healthcare reforms [3]. The success of these reforms will be influenced by a number of factors including China's social, political and economic development. The capacity of China's nurses to meet increasing healthcare needs and the retention of nurses in the Chinese healthcare system are also both integral to China's healthcare and future development. The evidence suggests that nursing education and scope of practice in China each require development to meet the demands [4,5] and an increasing number of nurses are seeking overseas employment [6–8].

There is scant literature available which focuses on nursing education in China. This paper seeks to contribute to knowledge in this area with a focus on the current status of nursing education in China, the challenges in nursing education; strategies to address those challenges and initiatives to support accessible and high quality healthcare.

2. Background

2.1. Diploma, advanced diploma, and baccalaureate

Nursing education in China comprises three levels: Diploma; Advanced Diploma; and Baccalaureate Degree. The Diploma is offered by schools of health with graduates drawn from junior high schools and enrolment is for a three-year nursing program designed to teach technical skills. The Advanced Diploma is offered by colleges and universities with graduates drawn from high schools and schools of health; enrolment is for a three-year associate nursing program offering general training alongside nursing theory and skills. The Baccalaureate Degree is offered by universities for graduates drawn from high schools and Diploma programs; students enrol in a five-year Bachelor of Nursing program providing a broad nursing foundation with associated sciences. This program equips students to work at an advanced level of nursing in higher ranking hospitals or in management positions [2,9,10].

Since 1992, however, there has been a push for nurses to advance their nursing qualification from Diploma level to Baccalaureate level [11]. The incentive for this is closely linked with career progression and more students now seek a higher level qualification through university-based training. As a consequence, Diploma level training is gradually being

phasing out. Nearly half of all nurses educated in China are now qualified with an Advanced Diploma or above, although there are still some nurses who will qualify with a Diploma [2]. Currently, over 38.8% of practising nurses hold a university Advanced Diploma and 8.9 an undergraduate or graduate qualification [10].

Despite the differences in nursing qualification levels, all nursing graduates are required to pass National Nurse Qualification Examination (NNQE) before they are registered to practice nursing [4,11].

From its inception, nursing education in China adopted the bio-medical model [2]. A study that examined Baccalaureate nursing programs in China revealed that these were a direct replica of the medical training curriculum. The only identifiable differences appeared to be that subject titles were suffixed with the word 'nursing' in place of the word 'medical' [12]. Presently, there is a move away from a curriculum framework with a medical focus to one that draws on a nursing process oriented model [13]. Nursing educators and educational bodies are supportive of this move. In addition to this shift of focus, nursing program design studies are currently in the process of examining the pedagogical model of problem-solving and role-play centred learning to help facilitate the application of theoretical knowledge to clinical nursing practice [4].

2.2. Master programs

In the period 2005–10, there was a five-fold increase in the number of students enrolled in Master of Nursing programs in China. This increase elevated the number of enrolled students to approximately 600 [14]. The Master of Nursing programs facilitate the development of expertise in either clinical practice or in research [15]. However, literature surrounding China's Master of Nursing curriculum development in the years 1991–2011 indicates that the Master of Nursing course does not focus exclusively on professional nursing [16]. Due to the paucity of research informing China's nursing education and practice, the Master of Nursing course instead draws heavily on the medical-focused curriculum and includes other areas of study such as political theory, English language, and statistics [16–19]. This is not the case in Master of Nursing courses in Western countries such as Australia [20].

2.3. Doctoral programs

Doctoral nursing programs in China are a relatively recent phenomenon. However, in the 5 years since the first Doctoral program was instituted in 2003, the number of programs has grown to 22 [21]. The Doctoral nursing programs aim to train nurses in education, research, and management. Currently,

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