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Original Article

Perceived stress among Macao nursing students in the clinical learning environment



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ABSTRACT

Objective: This study aimed at investigation of the stress perceived by Macao nursing students in the clinical learning environment.

Methods: A cross-sectional research was designed and 203 nursing students in a public higher education institute were recruited. The Stressors in Nursing Students Scale-Chinese Version (SINS-CN) was used to measure nursing students' stress. Data analysis includes descriptive analysis and analysis of variance.

Results: The overall SINS-CN mean score was 3.33 (SD = 0.49), while the scores for different dimensions were: clinical, 3.44 (SD = 0.54), education, 3.35 (SD = 0.62), finance and time, 3.31 (SD = 0.72), confidence, 3.21 (SD = 0.60), and personal problems, 3.03 (SD = 0.68). Among 10 most common stressors, four belong to the clinical dimension, four to the education dimension, one to the confidence dimension, and one to the finance & time dimension. Analysis for factors associated with stress indicated that no statistical significance was found in most demographic variables, except year two students' stress scores were significantly lower than those of students in other years (*p* values were between 0.000 and 0.026).

Conclusions: Macao nursing students, to some extent, experienced stress in clinical learning environment and the stress level was higher than that of Hong Kong nursing students. The most common stressors were related to clinical and educational dimensions. The study suggests that teaching and learning modalities and the workload of nursing students should be reviewed.

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1. Introduction

Stress refers to a dynamic interaction between the individual and the environment [1]. This interaction may lead to cognitive, emotional and behavioral alteration [2]. Nursing as a caring profession has been known to be a stressful occupation [3]. Nursing students who engage in a wide range of clinical duties during their learning in clinical settings share similar stressors as professional nurses experience. In addition, nursing students also have stress related to their educational studies and personal/social experience [4]. Stress can be deleterious to individuals and lead to physical and psychological distress [5]. This psychological distress may hamper students' academic performance and hence impede their pursuit of the nursing career temporarily or permanently [6]. What is more, stress and psychological distress may have negative effects on nursing graduates in the workforce [7].

Existing evidence indicates that nursing students have higher levels of stress than students in other disciplines [8,9], but stress varies at different education levels of nursing students and different nursing programs [7,10,11]. Common sources of stress in nursing students basically include: a) academic-related concerns such as workload, lack of knowledge, examination, teaching style; b) clinical practice for example, lack of competence, taking care of death and dying, shifting, supervision, assessment; c) relationships with others (clients, peers, teachers or other health professionals) [12]; and d) personal factors such as gender, age, new surroundings away from home, family structure, financial burdens and job roles [4,7,13].

Study on nursing student stress in the Macao Special Administrative Region of Republic of China (Macao SAR) is very limited. Vong and colleagues used a convenience sampling method to recruit 77 nursing students to complete a self-developed scale of nursing student stress [14]. The psychometric properties of the scale were not presented. The results indicated that the average level of stress was moderate and the clinical practice and academic workload were the first and second ranked stress factors. Another unpublished study was conducted by Li [15]. Its main purpose was to explore the effect of personal characteristics of nursing students on stress and coping strategies [15].

There are two nursing education agencies in Macao, a charity agency which was founded in 1923 and a government-funded agency, founded in 1964 [16]. Together with Macao's political system, the Macao nursing education system has experienced remarkable changes in the past 15 years since the return of Macao's sovereignty from Portugal to the People's Republic of China (PR China) in 1999. Nursing education has been transformed from hospital-based training to tertiary education based, from a three-year diploma program to the "3 + 1" supplementary bachelor degree (three-year diploma plus one-year of supplementary study), and then to the current four-year baccalaureate degree program [16].

Simultaneously, clinical practice has been reformed from supervision and assessment of students by clinical nurses to one that typifies the cooperative work of the nursing faculty and clinical nurses [16]. The advantage of doing this is ensuring the quality of students' learning in clinical practice.

However, it may cause more stress to students. In an Annual School-Student Dialog in one of the public universities in Macao, some nursing students reported that 'they are overloaded with work because assignments and assessment usually come from both nursing faculty and clinical supervision nurses'. Another unpublished report from the Student Affairs Office indicated that among 18 different disciplinary programs, the nursing program students ranked the highest in 'Level of Academic Challenge' [17].

In addition, students may be overwhelmed by and feel stressed in Macao's complex multicultural clinical environment. Although about 95% of the population is Chinese [18], Macao was a Portuguese colony for more than 400 years, resulting in a very multicultural society. The original multiculturalism has been compounded in recent years by a dramatic increase of immigration and tourism, making the healthcare services situation even more complicated and challenging [19]. A simple example is the increasingly multilingual environment, where three languages (Chinese, Portuguese and English) consisting of four dialects (Cantonese, Mandarin, Portuguese and English) are in daily use in clinical settings. Nursing students often report experiencing difficulty in such a multilingual working environment. Therefore, it is important for us to understand the stress perceived and stressors experienced by our nursing students so that we can prevent the undesirable impacts incurred in the current situation of healthcare provision in Macao. The general aim of this study was to investigate the stress perceived by Macao nursing students in the clinical learning environment. The specific objectives of the study were: a) to measure the level of stress perceived by nursing students; b) to identify the sources of nursing student stress in the clinical learning environment; and c) to analyze the factors that are associated with stress experienced by nursing students.

2. Methods

2.1. Study design

The study was a cross-sectional descriptive design using self-administered questionnaires for data collection.

2.2. Setting and sample

The study took place in a public higher education institution in Macao SAR. All students studying in the nursing program were recruited to minimize sampling error. The total number of nursing students was 231. Excluding 20 students who participated in the instrument test-retest reliability study, there were 211 participants in the main study.

2.3. Ethical consideration

Approval was sought from the Research Ethics Committee of the study setting before conducting the study. Permission for using the questionnaire was granted by the original corresponding author. All participants were assured of anonymity and confidentiality. A signed consent form was obtained from

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