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Original Article

Graduate students as preceptors: Effects on clinical teaching outcomes of medical nursing

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: To explore the feasibility of using graduate students as preceptors in the clinical education of medical nursing students.**Methods:** Five second-year graduate nursing students were recruited to participate in the clinical teaching of medical nursing for 38 undergraduates in the first semester of the 2010–2011 academic year, divided into two groups. The first group first received clinical teaching in caring for respiratory diseases from graduate preceptors for six weeks followed by clinical teaching in caring for circulatory diseases from nurse preceptors for six weeks. The second group received clinical teaching in the reverse order, from the nurse preceptors followed by the graduate student preceptors. Following training, all students were examined with a written test and scores were compared. In addition, review meetings were held to evaluate the teaching outcomes.**Results:** No significant differences in test scores were observed between the two teaching groups. Undergraduate student feedback indicated that the training provided by the graduate students was satisfactory, and the medical nursing course leader was satisfied with the teaching outcome with a few exceptions.**Conclusion:** These data indicate that graduate students are capable of training undergraduates in medical nursing, although some areas can be improved.

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1. Introduction

Clinical training is focused on working directly with patients and their problems [1], and such courses typically place both preceptors and students in a clinical scenario. For undergraduates majoring in Nursing, “Medical Nursing” is a core course that requires an extensive knowledge and practice in clinical settings. Training in this course plays a decisive role in the cultivation of proficient student nurses. Currently, Medical Nursing preceptors are primarily nurses from clinical settings. These preceptors have a firm grasp of clinical nursing skills and are aware of the latest developments in clinical nursing, furthermore they are proficient at clinically oriented teaching styles and comprise the majority of the clinical teaching force. However, due to the large number of undergraduate students coupled with shortages of nursing staff in comprehensive teaching hospitals, there is a shortage of adequately trained preceptors for undergraduate clinical courses [2].

As a potential solution, graduate students of nursing who have undergone strict screening and assessment have begun to join the teaching force. These students have a solid theoretical basis, and evidence suggests that student preceptors can be as good as associate professors in teaching clinical skills [3]. When successful, the preceptorship by graduate students can solve the problem of preceptor shortage, while providing graduate students with a better understanding of clinical nursing practices [4]. Moreover, the preceptorship experience provides an all-round competence development model for the graduate students themselves. The aims of this study were to explore the feasibility and efficacy of using graduate students as preceptors in clinical teaching of Medical Nursing and to assess whether they can achieve the desired teaching outcomes.

2. Methods

The study was a prospective comparative design.

2.1. Participants

A class of 38 fourth-year undergraduate students (in their 5th year of study) in the First Affiliated Hospital of Soochow University School of Nursing was recruited for the study in June, 2010. All of the subjects received clinical placement in the same hospital. The study spanned the first semester of the 2010–11 academic year (September through December, 2010), when the Medical Nursing course was offered.

2.2. Preceptor recruitment and training

Graduate student preceptors were pre-assessed by the faculty from the Medical Nursing Teaching and Research Division for their professional knowledge and teaching skills, followed by a round of trial clinical teaching. After screening, five second-year full-time graduate students of nursing were recruited to participate as clinical preceptors of medical nursing during the first semester of the 2010–2011 academic year. Among the five students, one had eight years of relevant work experience

while the rest did not. All five nurse preceptors included in the study had more than three years of experience in clinical teaching of medical nursing.

The graduate preceptors received two rounds of pedagogical training from the course leader, identical to the previous training received by the nurse preceptors. The first round of training focused on nursing pedagogy, including the key elements in teaching preparation and popular teaching methods such as the application of nursing processes in clinical teaching. The second round of training was focused on specialty nursing.

2.3. Clinical teaching arrangement

The 38 undergraduates being taught were divided into two groups of 19 members according to their student numbers in ascending order. To ensure the two groups were comparable, we compared their average scores from two prerequisite courses (fundamental nursing and health assessment). In addition, the two groups were comparable because they would receive clinical teaching of Medical Nursing in the same ward of the same hospital for the same amount of time. Prior to the study, the two groups had the same amount of extra-curricular clinical placement on average.

Both the graduate students and nurse preceptors adhered to the same syllabus, but their teaching plans were not identical. The first group (hereafter referred to as Students No. 1–19) first received clinical teaching in caring for respiratory diseases from graduate preceptors for six weeks (18 credit hours in total) followed by clinical teaching in caring for circulatory diseases from nurse preceptors for six weeks. The second group (hereafter referred to as Students No. 20–38) first received clinical teaching in caring for respiratory diseases from nurse preceptors followed by clinical teaching in caring for circulatory diseases from graduate preceptors for the same time periods.

2.4. Outcome measures

The undergraduate students were evaluated by preceptors using 2 comprehensive performance scores based on criteria described in the course syllabus (one for the flexible application of nursing process, the other for the ability to address patients’ problems, the full score being 5 each). In addition, the undergraduates completed two written exams covering nursing for respiratory and circulatory diseases (with the full score being 40 each). The written test was prepared by the course leader and graded by the teachers responsible for the theoretical teaching of medical nursing.

The exams included definition, fill-in-the-blank, multiple choice, and short answer questions along with case analyses. Both graduate and nurse preceptors were unaware of the contents of the test. Following examinations, a comparison of the four scores was made between Students No. 1–19 and Students No. 20–38.

In addition to the objective examinations, the course leader paid ongoing attention to the teaching outcomes via the following three means: (1) overseeing the clinical teaching each time; (2) hosting two review meetings in the middle and at the end of the semester respectively (consisting of the

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