



How Do Nursing Students Perceive Substance Abusing Nurses?

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ABSTRACT

Substance abuse among nurses was recognized by nurse leaders and professional nursing organizations as a growing threat to patient safety and to the health of the abusing nurse more than 30 years ago. Although numerous studies on nurse impairment were published in the 1980s and 1990s, there was minimal focus on student nurses' perceptions about impaired nurses and less research has been published more recently, despite a growing rate of substance abuse. A quasi-experimental study to explore the perceptions of student nurses toward nurses who are chemically dependent was conducted using a two-group, pretest–posttest design. The Perception of Nurse Impairment Inventory (PNII) was completed by student nurses at the beginning of their junior course work, prior to formal education about substance abuse. The PNII was repeated after the students received substance abuse education. The PNII was also completed by a control group of sophomore student nurses who did not receive the formal substance abuse education. A repeated measures analysis of variance was used to measure the differences between the two groups of students. Students who received the education chose more compassionate responses on the PNII and were more likely to respond that an impaired nurse's supervisor is responsible for supporting and guiding the impaired nurse to access professional care. Discrepancies in study findings about the efficacy of education for effecting positive attitudes of student nurses toward impaired nurses may be related to the length and type of the education.

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BACKGROUND

Nurses' work is both physically and emotionally stressful, driving some nurses to seek relief through use of various chemical substances. Over 150 years ago Jane Gibson, a nurse who accompanied Florence Nightingale to the Crimean War, was fired from her post-war position after arriving at work intoxicated; the media vilified Ms. Gibson for ruining the image of the Nightingale nurses (Monahan, 2003). Subsequently, chemical dependence among nurses was treated as a minor and rather taboo subject until its growing negative impact on the quality and safety of nursing care commanded attention in the 1980s. In one state, two recovering registered nurses and a social worker sought to help chemically dependent nurses find access to confidential professional treatment without losing their nursing licenses by creating a peer assistance program in collaboration with the state board of nursing. The program provided education about how to recognize the downward spiral of addiction, access treatment, and re-enter practice to nursing school faculty, students, and multi-disciplinary hospital employees.

Gradually, research about chemical dependence among nursing students emerged. Haack's, 1988 study reported that nursing students increased their consumption of alcohol as they progressed through their academic program, and Murphy (1989) found that content about addiction was broadly lacking in nurses' educational programs, but did not link those findings with Haack's findings. Evidence of growing numbers of impaired nurses provoked professional nursing organizations to provide educational videos alerting nurses to the signs of chemical dependence among colleagues and the appropriate responses, but research published to guide development of curriculum content was lacking. In a seminal study by Coleman et al. (1997), students entering four different colleges at the University of Arkansas for Medical Sciences completed the Standardized Substance Abuse Attitude Survey (SSAS) during 1989, 1990, and 1991. The pharmacy curriculum contained an entire course on drug and alcohol use and abuse that the nursing and other curricula did not. While an increase in the percentage of the nursing students trying cocaine, barbiturates, and benzodiazepines was found across the study, such an increase was not found among the pharmacy students. The different outcome among pharmacy students was attributed to the rich content of the full course in the pharmacy curriculum.

A study of 79 junior baccalaureate student nurses' perceptions about chemically impaired nurses by Wennerstrom and Rooda (1996)

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using the Perceptions of Nursing Impairment Inventory (PNII) revealed that the students considered chemical abuse a treatable illness, yet fewer than half of those students thought their nursing education provided adequate information regarding substance abuse or that they would recognize an impaired nurse. Aside from Polk, Glenden, and Devore (1993), Asteriadis, Davis, Masoodi, and Miller (1995), then Clark in 1999, more than 14 years later there is still little published about how to identify and support the impaired student nurse.

Interest in the topic seemed to flag as use of chemical substances in the general population became more widespread and socially accepted. By 2009, Copp reported that 10% of the 3.1 million nurses in the US with active licenses (Health Resources & Services Administration, 2007) abused chemicals to the extent that their practice was impaired. More recently, Monroe, Kenaga, Dietrich, Carter, and Cowan (2013) found that the rate of nurses enrolled in substance abuse monitoring programs continues to parallel the rate of substance abuse in the general public. Still, neither the American Association of Colleges of Nursing (AACN)'s Essentials of Baccalaureate Nursing Education (2008) nor Essentials of Doctoral Education (2006) requires course content related to chemical impairment of nurses. Moreover, although 45 states have programs that focus on patient safety and retention of recovering nurses (Monroe & Kenaga, 2010) few nursing schools provide assistance to the student with chemical dependency problems (Monroe, 2009; Monroe & Pearson, 2009).

Therefore, the aim of this quasi-experimental study was to explore the effectiveness of a multi-faceted educational initiative undertaken over the course of one full semester for expanding student nurses' understanding of the disease and developing more positive perceptions about nurses abusing chemical substances.

Significance of the Study

This study could help promote development of more effective and widespread education for nurses about chemical dependence and the benefits of supportive treatment of impaired nurses. Better education could help prevent student nurses from succumbing to impairment, saving their careers and their lives. Early recognition and positive support of chemically impaired nurses may help keep them in the workforce, thereby reducing the gravity of the nursing shortage, projected to be one million nurses by 2020 (Health Resources & Services Administration, 2007). In addition, the study may help address the two specific substance abuse objectives in *Healthy People 2020* (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 2010, p. SA7): to increase the proportion of persons who receive needed speciality treatment for alcohol or illicit drug abuse and to reduce the number of adults engaging in binge drinking or use of illicit drugs.

Theoretical Framework

This study was grounded in the theories of reasoned action (TRA) and of planned behavior (TPB) developed by Ajzen and Fishbein in 1980 to explain the predictability of a person's intention to engage in a given behavior. Both theories have been used to explain nurses' decision making in promoting healthy behavior (Albarracin, Johnson, Fishbein, & Muellerleile, 2001; Dwyer & Williams, 2002; Werner & Mendelsson, 2001). The theories explain that determinants of behavioral intention are rooted in attitude ("a person's overall positive or negative feeling about performing a behavior", Werner, 2004, p. 125), subjective norms (perception of support by significant others to perform or not perform the behavior), perceived behavioral control (perception of how easy or hard the behavior is to do), and perceived moral obligation (Werner, 2004). Together, the four determinants shape the intention to act.

METHOD

This study was granted exempt status by the Committee on Research of the study site and by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of Case Western Reserve University prior to data collection. All potential participants were fully informed about the purpose and procedures of the study prior to their making a voluntary decision to participate. Return of the completed questionnaires served as consent to participate in the study.

Design

This quasi-experimental study was conducted using a two-group, pretest–posttest design. Neither group had any course work on substance abuse or chemical dependence prior to participation in the study. A set of educational interventions was provided only to the participant group. To control for threats to internal validity, participants were instructed not to discuss the research and the questionnaire was completed independently in a proctored environment.

Sample

The convenience sample pool consisted of 120 sophomore and junior baccalaureate nursing students at a private Jesuit-affiliated university in the northeastern US. Of the 120 potential participants, 100 voluntarily completed the pretest questionnaire, an 83% response rate. Of those 100 participants, 33 were entering the junior year of the nursing program and received education about substance abuse and chemical dependence following completion of the pretest questionnaire. The remaining 67 participants were entering their sophomore year and comprised the control group that did not receive any education about substance abuse or chemical dependence. Both groups completed the questionnaire again at the end of the semester.

There were two exclusion criteria. First, any participant who completed the pretest but did not complete the posttest or whose posttest could not be matched to his or her pretest, was excluded from the study. Second, any participant who did not answer at least 90% of the questionnaire items was excluded.

Procedure

At the beginning of the academic semester sophomore and junior nursing students were invited to voluntarily participate in the study. To protect confidentiality about which potential participants actually participated, the demographic survey and PNII questionnaire were either completed, or left blank, and sealed in the return envelope provided. Various didactic and clinical education interventions were carried out across the junior semester. The sophomore class was not exposed to any content, either didactic or clinical, regarding substance abuse or chemical dependence. On the last day of the semester the PNII was again voluntarily completed by both the sophomore and the junior participants. A third party instructor paired the pretests to the posttests so that neither the researcher nor the course instructor knew who participated.

Measures

Variables

The independent variable for this study was the substance abuse and chemical dependence education. The education was operationalized as course work at the junior level and included the following: (a) didactic lectures provided by an expert in the field; (b) attendance at an Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) meeting followed by a written reaction paper; (c) completion of various reading assignments selected to facilitate discussion in the classroom; and (d) 6 weeks of

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