

Research

Development of a questionnaire to assess health profession students' knowledge of older adults

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Abstract

Objective: The objectives of this study were twofold: to develop and psychometrically test a questionnaire to measure health profession students' knowledge of aging in older adults and to assess comparative professional geriatric knowledge in pharmacy, nursing, and physician assistant (PA) students.

Design: An interdisciplinary team of faculty with clinical geriatric expertise and experience in item scale development designed a scale, termed the Geriatric Knowledge Assessment Scale (GKAS), to measure health profession students' geriatric knowledge in the areas of aging disease, physical activity, drug therapy, and nutrition. Upon development of the scale, the psychometric properties of the GKAS were analyzed. The tool was administered to pharmacy, nursing, and PA students in the final semester of their professional education programs.

Results: A total of 412 students participated in the test and 408 completed the questionnaire with health profession responses as follows: pharmacy students ($n = 159$), nursing students ($n = 162$), and PA students ($n = 87$). PA students scored at a significantly higher level on the GKAS than both pharmacy and nursing students ($p < 0.001$), and pharmacy students scored significantly higher than nursing students ($p = 0.05$). Overall, 65% of students agreed or strongly agreed on a five-point Likert scale that the gerontological content in their professional education adequately prepared them to address the health care needs of older adults.

Conclusion: Further research and utilization of the GKAS in geriatric health care education is required. Our findings also support ongoing evaluation of geriatrics education and training within all health professions.

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Introduction

Most of the leading causes of death in older adults are due to chronic conditions, such as hypertension, arthritis, heart disease, cancer, or diabetes.¹ Their incidence increases with advancing age, and more than three-quarters of adults

older than 65 years have at least one chronic condition that requires ongoing management and contributes to declines in daily functioning.² It has become increasingly challenging to provide optimal care for the aging population as more than 50% of older adults have three or more chronic diseases.³ Inappropriate medication use and polypharmacy are particularly problematic in older persons. As the “baby boomers” age, this will escalate and cause an increasingly heavy burden on the health care system.⁴

Successful models of comprehensive care for chronic disease include patient-centered collaborative care, such as the “medical home” concept, which supports patient self-management.⁵ Collaborative interprofessional teams can help improve health care for elderly patients who have complex needs by increasing coordination in care delivery^{6,7} while decreasing the use of unnecessary and inappropriate health care services.⁸ Unfortunately, there is a dearth of trained physicians and other professionals who are able to provide such collaborative care to older adults.^{2,4,9}

In response to the Institute of Medicine’s (IOM) report “To Err is Human,” which calls for patient-centered care provided by effective health care teams,¹⁰ the standards of the agencies that accredit health professional education programs and the competencies that are expected now include explicit attention to interprofessional collaboration and teamwork.^{11–13} Programs are urged to prepare students to be active members of interprofessional teams and to equip them with the knowledge and skills that are necessary to provide quality chronic care. Initiatives to develop geriatric interprofessional curricula and team training are underway.⁷

Pharmacy, nursing, and physician assistant students’ geriatric education

During the past decade, limitations in pharmacy, nursing, and physician assistant (PA) students’ geriatric education and knowledge have been noted.^{14–22} Concurrently, there have been efforts to expand and improve geriatric education in these professional education programs. It is important for all students in the health professions to have a common knowledge base about biological aging and lifestyle-management techniques to prevent and manage chronic diseases that are most likely to impact older adults. Health professions’ education initiatives are expanding to better prepare students to deliver appropriate care. Recent pharmacy initiatives include standards, recommendations, and a curriculum guide to enhance and support pharmacists’ education of geriatric-specific medication to assure safe and effective drug therapy for this population.^{11,23–25} While the American Society of Consultant Pharmacists (ASCP) has designed a pharmacy curriculum guide in geriatrics as a tool for pharmacy educators, as well as pharmacists and pharmacy students, it is important to note that currently the Accreditation Council for Pharmacy Education (ACPE) does not require geriatrics within the pharmacy curricula. There is a requirement in the ACPE standards for instruction in “Special

Populations”; however, the ACPE standards do not provide a guide or specify resources or extent of instruction in this area. Thus, it is important to recognize that the pharmacy curricula vary in the extent of geriatrics within pharmacy programs. With regard to nursing, publications from the American Association of Colleges of Nursing, specifically *Older Adults: Recommended Baccalaureate Competencies and Curricular Guidelines for Gerontological Nursing Care*²⁶ and *Essentials of Baccalaureate Education for Professional Nursing Practice*,¹² require the incorporation of specific geriatric nursing content into baccalaureate nursing curricula and have established core competencies in this domain, which include the knowledge of health promotion, risk reduction, and disease prevention across the lifespan. Also, the Accreditation Review Commission on Education for the Physician Assistant²⁷ standards mandate knowledge of physical examination and psychological development of older adults, including chronic care and end-of-life issues, and supervised clinical practice experience with patients in a long-term care facility.²⁸ No study to date has assessed health profession students’ comparative professional geriatric knowledge of older adults who are at risk for or with chronic conditions. The project described in this article specifically addresses students’ professional knowledge of aging in older adults upon completion of their professional education in pharmacy, nursing, or PA studies.

Assessment of health professions students’ geriatric professional knowledge

The most widely used scales for the assessment of students’ knowledge of aging are the *Palmore Facts on Aging Quizzes: FAQ1 and FAQ2*.²⁹ These scales measure basic knowledge of age-related changes in physical, mental, and social functioning and ability, as well as ageist attitudes and bias. Results of studies based on the *Palmore quizzes* have often indicated that students in medical, nursing, and physician assistant professions lack adequate knowledge about aging.^{14,30–35}

The *Palmore quizzes* are widely used to assess aging knowledge in general and health care professional and student populations. However, they were not designed to specifically assess clinical knowledge of geriatric care.³⁶ Other scales have been developed to examine general geriatric knowledge in primary care residents,³⁷ medical students’ growth in the field of geriatric medicine,^{38,39} understanding of Alzheimer’s disease,⁴⁰ and normal vs. pathological memory aging.⁴¹ However, a scale that measures health profession students’ professional knowledge of aging in older adults is still lacking.

Study objectives

The primary purpose of our study was twofold: (1) to develop and psychometrically test a scale to measure health profession students’ professional knowledge of aging in

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