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# The patient as experience broker in clinical learning

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Accepted 23 June 2008

## KEYWORDS

Clinical education;  
Patients;  
Teaching;  
Clinical learning;  
Students

## Summary

*The Study:* A review of the literature reveals deficit information on patient's involvement in student's learning. The study presented in this paper investigates how the educationally unprepared patient engages with students and experienced clinicians to become involved in learning and teaching encounters.

*Methodology:* As a qualitative study 14 adult patients were interviewed to determine how they perceived experienced clinicians and students engage in learning and teaching moments and how the patient contributes to students learning to care.

*The Findings:* Revealed is a new and exciting dimension in learning and teaching in the clinical environment. Patients as experience brokers are positioned in a unique learning triad as they mediate and observe teaching and learning to care between students and experienced clinicians whilst also becoming participants in teaching to care.

*Recommendations:* Further investigation is warranted to determine the multi-dimensional aspects of patients' involvement in student learning in various clinical environments. Future studies have the potential to represent a new educational perspective (andragogy).

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## Introduction

It would be extraordinary for nurse education to consider learning nursing without patients. It is generally acknowledged that a patient's health problem, diagnosis, interventions, treatments and

outcomes provide the stimulus for the design and boundaries of clinical educative events.

The parameters of these clinical educative events are contextually bound by the patient and it "is the patient's needs which determine the nature of nursing's work" (Smith, 1987 p. 419) which in turn constitutes the teaching and learning events available to students. The patient's circumstances become the learning situation for students. However the active role the every-day patient, without

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formal teaching training from faculty, plays in contributing to learning encounters for students has received little substantial attention in nursing (Twinn, 1995; Suikkala and Leino-Kilpi, 2001, 2005; Mossop and Wilkinson, 2006; Trowle, 2006).

Of note are the many cursory remarks, made in texts and journal articles alike, of the importance of the patient to students' learning. For something that has been considered such an integral aspect of nursing education, research on the role of the patient in student's learning is surprisingly limited.

## Literature review

As early as 1975, Infante noted that 'patient contact is the heart of student's activities' (p. 22) in the clinical setting. However, there is little known about what the patient thinks of these encounters. It was not until 2001 that Suikkala and Leino-Kilpi conducted a comprehensive review of the nursing literature from 1984 to 1998 on student-patient relationships that some insights were gained. This is perhaps one of the most comprehensive reviews to date. Essentially, the review highlights patients' experiences and perceptions of their role in student learning and of the student's involvement in their care.

Of the limited number of relevant papers reviewed (approximately 10), by Suikkala and Leino-Kilpi (2001), they found that patients were willing to participate in students' learning to assist them gain experience and move towards becoming qualified. However, beyond participation Stacy and Spencer (1999) also revealed that patients found satisfaction in helping students. Patients providing feedback and encouragement to students were also determined beneficial to the learning experience (Suikkala and Leino-Kilpi, 2001).

Through social interactions patients also considered that students gained knowledge of the patient's experience from the patient's perspective (Suikkala and Leino-Kilpi, 2001; Lathlean et al., 2006). Spencer et al. (2000, p. 853) clearly indicate that "patients see themselves as experts in their own condition (both in terms of telling and showing), as exemplars of the condition (intuitively, perhaps, recognizing the importance of 'illness scripts') and as having a hand in the development of professional skills and attitudes".

A later study by Costello and Horne (2001) reached similar conclusions and also suggested that interpersonal engagement can also be therapeutic for the patient. Wykurz and Kelly's (2002) system-

atic review of descriptions, evaluations or research programs involving patients as teachers in medical programs further established that the patient's involvement created a sense of empowerment and acknowledged their understanding and experience of their condition.

Continuing their original research, on patient and student relationships, Suikkala and Leino-Kilpi (2005), revealed some insight into the way patients perceive experienced clinicians (staff nurses) assist in the process of student learning. Suikkala and Leino-Kilpi (2005) reported that good role models, who offered supportive supervision and encouraging feedback to students, were essential to facilitate successful patient relationships. Furthermore, Stockhausen (2005) found that experienced clinicians are knowledgeable of patients' conditions and they can often detect learning events associated with the patient that the student may not yet notice. Access for the student is gained to this learning through the experienced clinician assigned to the care of the patient.

In recent years there has been a heightened interest in how patients, or how they are commonly referred to now in the literature, service users or consumers, participate in the education of nurses or other health care professionals (Trowle, 2006; Lathlean et al., 2006). However, many of these studies report on the use of trained patients and the everyday patient or service user is made little reference to.

While the above review offers some insight into the patient's role in student encounters there remains limited information on the patient's perceptions of their role in student's learning and of the student's involvement in the patient's care. Therefore, this study sought to investigate; what observations patients make of students involved in their care; how they perceive they assist student's learning to care and how patients perceive experienced clinicians assist students to learn how to care.

## The study

As a qualitative study the research was an attempt to investigate the inter-subjectivity of how patients attribute meaning to their experiences. Carr and Kemmis highlight this point:

Actions cannot be observed in the same way as natural objects. They can only be interpreted by reference to the actor's motives, intentions and purposes in performing the action. To identify

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