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So what is so good about clinical experience? A mental health nursing perspective

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Summary The available literature suggests that undergraduate nursing students generally do not have positive attitudes towards working in the mental health field but that clinical experience is the most important factor influencing the development of a more favourable outlook. Despite this there is very little attention paid to the factors that contribute to a positive clinical experience. The aim of this paper is to examine the level of, and factors contributing to, undergraduate nursing students' satisfaction with clinical experience. A survey was administered to undergraduate nursing students ($n = 146$). The findings support the available literature in suggesting that the provision of support and the ability to become actively involved in patient care are the two most important factors affecting the perceived quality of clinical placements. However, this study contradicts the findings of earlier research in demonstrating a higher degree of satisfaction with clinical experience in inpatient settings. This reflected the view that there was less opportunity for patient care involvement within the community environment. Given the increased emphasis on community care, it is important that students are actively engaged in the care and treatment process in order that they have the opportunity to meet learning objectives in the mental health field.

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Introduction

The aim of contemporary undergraduate nursing education is to develop the professional knowledge, skills and attitudes to enable nurses to advance the health of all Australians (Commonwealth of Australia, 2001). Mental health problems affect approximately 20% of the Australian population (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 1998), are a leading cause of disability (Department of Human Services, 1999; Mathers et al., 1999), a national health priority (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 1999) and of global concern (World Health Organisation, 2001).

Mental health problems are more common among people undergoing treatment for a health problem (Andrews et al., 2002; Hotopf et al., 1998) as people with a mental illness have more physical health problems than the general population (Harris and Barraclough, 1998; Hotopf et al., 1998). Despite this, mental health problems often go unrecognised and untreated in non-psychiatric health settings (Andrews and Garrity, 2000). The mainstreaming or amalgamation of mental health services with general health services has also increased the probability that nurses are likely to encounter people with concurrent mental health problems (Commonwealth of Australia, 2002; Sharrock and Happell, 2001).

The mental health component of contemporary undergraduate nursing courses has two major aims (Department of Human Services, 2001). The first is to prepare nurses to provide competent mental health care in non-mental health settings (Commonwealth of Australia, 2002; Department of Human Services, 2001). The second major aim is to provide prospective mental health nurses with a sound foundation to practice at a beginning level in a specialist mental health setting (Clinton and Hazelton, 2000).

The extent to which these goals are likely to be achieved will require that undergraduate nursing students develop positive attitudes towards people experiencing mental illness. However, numerous studies have suggested that nurses working in non-mental health settings do not generally hold positive attitudes (Bailey, 1998; Gillette et al., 1996; Hopkins, 2002; Mavundla, 2000; Wand and Happell, 2001; Wynaden et al., 2000). Furthermore, it does not appear that comprehensive nursing has improved this situation (Clinton, 2001; Clinton et al., 2001; Commonwealth of Australia, 2002; Department of Human Services, 2001; Happell, 1998, 2001; Senate Community Affairs Committee, 2002; Wynaden et al., 2000).

A substantial body of literature describes nursing students' attitudes toward people with a mental illness (Callaghan et al., 1997; Chan and Cheng, 2001; Nolan and Chung, 1999; Rohde, 1996) and opinions may have changed in line with recent trends in mental health service delivery. Recent research indicated that students were not interested in mental health nursing as a future career option (Happell, 1999; Stevens and Dulhunty, 1997). However, a positive clinical placement emerged as a significant factor in increasing interest in this field of practice (Arnold et al., 2004; Martin and Happell, 2001; Mullen and Murray, 2002).

Most research exploring the influence of mental health nursing education on undergraduate nursing students has involved clinical placements in inpatient settings (Granskar et al., 2001; Grindel et al., 2001; Haas and Hermanns, 2003; Martin and Happell, 2001; Munnukka et al., 2002; Nolan and Chung, 1999; Rohde 1996; Slimmer et al., 1990). However, this situation is changing with recent research involving a mix of inpatient and outpatient settings (Arnold et al., 2004; Chan and Cheng, 2001; Fisher, 2002; Happell, 2000; Thornton and Chapman, 2000). The change is consistent with the expansion of community mental health and the decrease in psychiatric inpatient beds.

In a study by Perese (1996), students rated inpatient placements less positively than community placements. The students mentioned many negative aspects including not knowing what they should be doing, not being included in the unit activities, feeling that they were in the way and insufficient time with patients, witnessing nurses' uncaring interaction with patients and nurses unprofessional behaviour toward each other. There was limited interaction between patients and staff, understaffing and lack of support services.

Despite the fact that most mental health care is delivered in the community there is limited research relating to nursing education in community mental health settings. Furthermore, given the importance of clinical education in increasing student interest in mental health nursing as a career, it is surprising to find a paucity of literature exploring the specific components of a clinical that make it more rewarding for students. The aim of this paper is to explore the characteristics of clinical experience perceived both positively and negatively by undergraduate nursing students, with specific attention paid to the differences between inpatient and community settings.

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