



# A comparison of curricular approaches of care of the aged in Swedish and US nursing programs

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## KEYWORDS

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**Summary** In an era of global aging, the steady increase in older people in Sweden and the United States is having a direct effect on nursing practice, presenting unprecedented opportunities and challenges in nursing education. The aim of this study was to highlight differences and similarities in curricular approaches to care of aged in Swedish and US baccalaureate nursing programs. The Swedish response rate was 100% ( $N = 26$ ); the US response rate was 36% ( $N = 202$ ). The results, which compare curricula approaches, have implications for nursing education in Sweden and the United States. Both include stand-alone and integrated courses on care of the aged, geriatrics and gerontology. Differences are noted in the percentage of programs that include care of the age in their curricula and the clinical education settings. Results of this study add to the sparse body of knowledge of cross-cultural nursing research on curricular approaches to geriatrics and gerontology, highlight similarities and differences in nursing education in two countries and invite dialogue among nurse educators. Future research is needed to address curricular issues on the aged population and cross cultural perspectives.

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## Introduction

Older persons comprise an increasing proportion of our population. Globally, according to United Nations, the 60 year and older population will increase from one-half billion in 1990 to 1.5 billion

in 2050. The rate of this increase is 800,000 persons per month (Tirrito, 2004). In Sweden, the 80 year and older age group tripled between 1960 and 2002. As of 2005, Sweden is the only country where more than every 20th person is over 80 years (Gurner and Thorslund, 2003). Nearly, 13% of the US population is over 65 years. By 2030, 20% of the US population is projected to be over 65 years; and 80% of those will be over 80 years (Administration on Aging, 2004).

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Older people increasingly utilize services for health. In Sweden, those over 65 years utilize a large proportion of predominantly public funded health care system. A hospital in Sweden reported those over 75 years who visited the emergency department comprised 25% of all annual visits (University Hospital Statistics, 2002). Similarly, those over 65 years in the US utilize a large portion of public and private health care services. This includes 60% of ambulatory adult primary care visits, 80% home visits, and constitutes 48% of hospital patients and 85% of nursing home residents (Malugani, 2000).

The dramatic increase in the body of knowledge of gerontology and geriatrics since 1985 has opened up nursing perspectives on aging. In the midst of dramatic changing demographics and the explosion of knowledge about older people, how do we prepare nurses to work with older persons in need of health care?

In Sweden and the US nursing education leads to a baccalaureate degree. Swedish nursing education is primarily publicly funded requiring three years to complete. US baccalaureate nursing education is publicly and privately funded and usually four years in length.

## Background

A review of published literature since 1998 was conducted using cumulative index for nursing and allied health literature (CINAHL) and PubMed. Search terms included 'elder care', 'geriatric', 'gerontology', 'curriculum', 'stand-alone course', 'nursing research', 'baccalaureate', 'Sweden' and 'United States'. Very little research was found. Results of several descriptive studies showed the status of care of the aged, gerontology, and geriatric nursing content in undergraduate (e.g., Baumbusch and Andrusyszyn, 2002; Fagerberg et al., 1997; Rosenfeld et al., 1999; Berman et al., 2005) and both graduate and undergraduate (e.g., Cho et al., 2002; Oelke, 2003) curricula in Canada, Germany, Sweden, US and Korea, respectively. Results of Scottish research with registered nurses revealed need for significant attitudinal changes of educators to adequately prepare nurses to cope with the changing role of the community gerontological nurse (Oberski et al., 1999).

Three studies (Fagerberg et al., 1997; Rosenfeld et al., 1999; Berman et al., 2005) reported results of national surveys of gerontological nursing content in baccalaureate nursing programs focused on educational topics, such as curriculum, content, and faculty preparation. The instrument used by Rosenfeld et al. (1999) and Berman et al. (2005)

was developed based on a review of the literature about instruments used to survey gerontological nursing and expert panel review. Results showed that one in four nursing schools required a stand-alone course in gerontology and, of 80% of respondents, less than one-fourth of the content in integrated curricula addressed gerontology (Rosenfeld et al., 1999). A follow-up study conducted in 2003 showed that 92% of the schools reported integrated gerontological content compared to 63% in 1997 (Berman et al., 2005). Results of a regional study (Grocki and Fox, 2004) exploring the extent to which gerontology was included in US undergraduate nursing programs indicated 85% of respondents did not require a course in gerontology. These authors attested that older adults have distinct needs that should be addressed in nursing curricula and that nursing curricula that integrate gerontology were inadequate in content compared with those that offer stand-alone courses. Furthermore, they advocated for nurses to be well educated in care of older adults and further research about curricula responses to changing US demographics. Fagerberg et al. (1997) advocated that selection and organization of knowledge and methods of teaching gerontology and geriatrics are vital to develop students' interest in working with elderly in the future.

Malugani (2000) writes that "most schools of nursing are not making the grade when it comes to preparing students to care for older Americans" (p. 1). Mezey (1996) promotes more gerontological education in nursing schools.

Little research is available regarding curricular approaches to older adults and cross cultural studies are sparse. Of significance are three national studies (Fagerberg et al., 1997; Rosenfeld et al., 1999; Berman et al., 2005) that provided a foundation for future research. As nursing faculty concerned with curricular decisions about geriatric/gerontology nursing education, we decided to pursue a cross-cultural comparison of results of similar studies conducted in Sweden and the US.

## Aim

The aim of this study was to highlight differences and similarities in curricular approaches to care of aged in Swedish and United States baccalaureate nursing programs.

## Methods

The design for this project was descriptive, using survey method. The Fagerberg et al. (1997) ques-

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