



Confidence and authority through new knowledge: An evaluation of the national educational programme in paediatric oncology nursing in Sweden



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SUMMARY

Background: There is a lack of nurse specialists in many paediatric hospitals in Sweden. This lack of competence is devastating for childhood cancer care because it is a highly specialised area that demands specialist knowledge. Continuing education of nurses is important to develop nursing practice and also to retain them.

Objectives: The aim of this study was to evaluate a Swedish national educational programme in paediatric oncology nursing.

Settings and participants: The nurses who participated came from all of the six paediatric oncology centres as well as from general paediatric wards. At the time of the evaluation, three groups of registered nurses ($n = 66$) had completed this 2 year, part-time educational programme.

Design and methods: A study specific questionnaire, including closed and open-ended questions was sent to the 66 nurses and 54 questionnaires were returned. Answers were analysed using descriptive statistics and qualitative content analysis.

Results: The results show that almost all the nurses (93%) stayed in paediatric care after the programme. Furthermore, 31% had a position in management or as a consultant nurse after the programme. The vast majority of the nurses (98%) stated that the programme had made them more secure in their work. The nurses were equipped, through education, for paediatric oncology care which included: knowledge generating new knowledge; confidence and authority; national networks and resources. They felt increased confidence in their roles as paediatric oncology nurses as well as authority in their encounters with families and in discussions with co-workers. New networks and resources were appreciated and used in their daily work in paediatric oncology.

Conclusions: The programme was of importance to the career of the individual nurse and also to the quality of care given to families in paediatric oncology. The national educational programme for nurses in Paediatric Oncology Care meets the needs of the highly specialised care.

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Background

Continuing Education of Nurses in Sweden

There is a lack of nurse specialists in many paediatric hospitals in Sweden, especially in the larger cities caused, among other things, by a high level of nurse turnover. Thus, the number of nurse specialists trained does not correspond to the needs of the healthcare sector. Continuing education of nurses is important not only because it enables nurses to develop their nursing practice, but also assists them in pursuing nursing research, and in guiding education and training (Hollis, 2005). A work environment that encourages a higher competence level among

nurses leads to a better quality of patient care (Kramer et al., 2011). Recent research indicates that higher academic degrees earned by nurses promote better patient survival (Aiken et al., 2014). Furthermore, to improve nurses individual competence is one way to retain them (Coomber and Barriball, 2007; Hart, 2005; Spivak et al., 2011).

Paediatric Oncology in Sweden

The survival rate of children with cancer has undergone dramatic improvement since the 1970s. This improvement reflects the intensification of therapy and the advancement of supportive care and nursing (Gustafsson et al., 2007). Paediatric oncology has become highly specialised and in Sweden this care is centralised to six centres where the initial diagnostic workups and intensive treatment of cancer in children takes place. These children are also cared for at general

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paediatric wards where certain parts of the treatment may be provided, and thus the family's needs to be close to home can be met (af Sandeberg, 2011). Often on these wards, specific staff members are assigned to care for children with oncology diagnoses. The lack of nurses and competence in paediatric oncology nursing is devastating for childhood cancer care. Current developments in paediatric oncology demand a high degree of specialization, with nurses who possess specialist knowledge, skills and experience in the field.

Continuing Education for Nurses in Paediatric Oncology

In paediatric oncology, those who have attended a specialist training programme most often are specialists in health care for children and adolescents, which includes, if any, minimal education in paediatric oncology. Another alternative is specialist training in oncology, lacking the child-perspective. In Sweden it is possible, since 2008, for physicians to obtain a specialist degree in paediatric oncology (National Board of Health and Welfare, 2008). This opportunity is still not offered to nurses. However, nurses with a licence to practise may also undertake continuing professional education to increase their competence.

Development of a New Educational Programme for Nurses in Paediatric Oncology Care

On the initiative of the profession, a 2 year part-time educational programme for nurses in paediatric oncology care started up in Sweden in 2003, in cooperation between the University of Gothenburg and the Swedish Childhood Cancer Foundation. Between 2003 and 2010 three groups of nurses have undertaken this educational programme. The nurses had experience from paediatric cancer care and came from all six paediatric cancer centres in Sweden and from regional hospitals.

The programme consisted of 45 Swedish credits for higher education, which are conformable to the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS), including: 15 ECTS in paediatric oncology and 30 ECTS in paediatric oncology nursing. The medical elements were integrated as far as possible with the nursing elements during the programme. The programme was divided in four sections (Table 1). Each section started with an intensive week of lectures and group discussions and thereafter the nurses combined their regular work at their departments with educational assignments including an exam on each of the elements. In addition, continually during the course of the programme, they worked with a larger group to write national paediatric oncology care guidelines. The programme was held on the advanced (second) level of study and led to a certificate in paediatric oncology nursing. The aim of the programme was to give the students the opportunity to acquire deeper knowledge and skills in paediatric oncology and in nursing care of children with cancer (Enskär et al., 2005) and in the longer perspective raising the level of competence among nurses caring for children with cancer and thereby promoting them to stay.

Objectives

The aim of this study was to evaluate the Swedish national educational programme in paediatric oncology nursing.

Research specific questions included: (i) What are the nurses working situation after completing the educational programme? (ii) What

Table 1

Presentation of the sections included in the educational programme for nurses in paediatric oncology care.

Section	Medical elements	Nursing elements
1	Leukaemia & lymphoma	Encounters in health care
2	Solid tumours I	Evidence based nursing
3	Solid tumours II	Life during cancer treatment
4	Brain tumours	Palliative care and life after treatment.

are nurses' perceptions of the influence of the educational programme, on their professional practice?

Methods

Design

This is a descriptive questionnaire study with both quantitative and qualitative elements.

Participants

By March 2010, three cohorts had graduated since this programme for registered nurses in paediatric oncology care was established in 2003. All together 69 nurses entered the programme and, of them, 66 graduated. Of these 3 were men and 63 women and the age range was 24–57 years old with 42% between 35 and 44 years old. The questionnaire was sent out to all the 66 nurses who had completed the programme and 54 answered and returned the questionnaire (response rate 82%). Most of them (61%) had been nurses for between 11 and 20 years but their practical experience of paediatric oncology varied (4–32 years, mean 13.6 years); see Table 2 for a presentation of the participants. At the point in time when the questionnaire was answered (see Table 4) 33 (61%) worked at one of the six paediatric oncology centres, 18 (33%) at general paediatric wards and 3 (6%) in other facilities. Half of the nurses (50%) worked as bedside nurses and 20% as consultant nurses.

Data Collection

Data collection began at the end of October 2011, and continued until beginning of 2012. The questionnaire together with a written information letter was sent by mail to the eligible participants. The information letter described the objective of the study and declared that the data would be treated as strictly confidential. The questionnaire was in Swedish and started with two questions concerning the amount of years they had worked as a nurse in general and as a nurse in paediatric oncology. These were followed by closed yes/no questions concerning their current professional practice including questions about work tasks and/or position, initiation of quality improvement, sharing knowledge with co-workers, searching for and using new knowledge and/or research, participating in/performing external education inputs and/or research, and feelings of safety/security in work. In addition, there was a possibility to give an open-ended answer to each of the questions. The questionnaire ended with an open-ended question concerning the

Table 2

Presentation of the current professional characteristics of the participants in the study.

	n (%)	Mean
Number of participants	54/66 (82)	
Years since nursing graduation		18,3
6–10	5 (9)	
11–20	33 (61)	
21–30	11 (20)	
>31	5 (9)	
Years in paediatric oncology		13,6
≤5	3 (6)	
6–10	12 (22)	
11–20	31 (57)	
21–30	6 (11)	
≥31	2 (4)	
Still in paediatric oncology		
Yes	50 (93)	
No	4 (7)	
Position		
Bedside nurse	27 (50)	
Consultant nurse	11 (20)	
Ward manager	6 (11)	
Other position	10 (19)	

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