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Text messaging to support off-campus clinical nursing facilitators: A descriptive survey

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ARTICLE INFO

SUMMARY

Background: Managing large student cohorts can be a challenge for university academics, coordinating these units. Bachelor of Nursing programmes have the added challenge of managing multiple groups of students and clinical facilitators whilst completing clinical placement. Clear, time efficient and effective communication between coordinating academics and clinical facilitators is needed to ensure consistency between student and teaching groups and prompt management of emerging issues.
Methods: This study used a descriptive survey to explore the use of text messaging via a mobile phone, sent from coordinating academics to off-campus clinical facilitators, as an approach to providing direction and support.
Results: The response rate was 47.8% (n = 22). Correlations were found between the approachability of the coordinating academic and clinical facilitator perception that, a) the coordinating academic understood issues on clinical placement ($r = 0.785$, $p < 0.001$), and b) being part of the teaching team ($r = 0.768$, $p < 0.001$). Analysis of responses to qualitative questions revealed three themes: connection, approachability and collaboration.
Conclusions: This study demonstrates that use of regular text messages improves communication between coordinating academics and clinical facilitators. Findings suggest improved connection, approachability and collaboration between the coordinating academic and clinical facilitation staff.

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Introduction

Within the current university context, academic coordination of nursing clinical units in a Bachelor programme provides numerous challenges. Management of increasingly large numbers of students on and off campus requires assistance by equally large numbers of clinical facilitators. Whilst students are on clinical placement, clear communication between coordinating academics and clinical facilitators is imperative to ensure consistency between student groups and prompt management of issues as they arise. Coordinating academics often continue to have teaching, research and administrative responsibilities on campus whilst student groups are on placement, making it vital that communication is not only clear but also time effective (Boyd et al, 2011).

Effective communication is essential for staff management and consistency among teams (Gilley et al., 2009). Methods commonly used by coordinating academics to communicate with clinical facilitators include post or email prior to clinical placements. During clinical placement, communication is commonly via email and telephone. At facilities with large numbers of students, or if issues arise requiring facilitator assistance, face-to-face meetings are arranged. Although individual face-to-face conversations with clinical facilitators may be optimal (Agarwal, 2010), time and geographic constraints mean that this mode of communication is not always possible.

The use of mobile telephone technology including the use of text messaging, known as Short Message Service (SMS), is now used ubiquitously in society. Current trends highlight that mobile phones are replacing traditional methods of communication. As of December 2011, 88% of the Australian population (14 years and over) owned or used a mobile phone, compared with 83% in 2007. Mobile phone adoption is increasing in popularity, with 88% of the Australian population now using or owning one (Roy Morgan Research, 2012).

Literature Review

The use of mobile phones and SMS has grown exponentially over the past 10 years (Horstmanshof and Power, 2005) with this technology now being utilised to remind patients of appointments and medication administration schedules (Bouvy et al, 2011; Hughes et al, 2011), send emergency alert messages (Gow et al, 2009), and offer support to tertiary students (Young et al, 2010). The content of text messages, hereafter referred to as Short Message Service (SMS), sent to university students often include: providing support, motivation and continuity; alerts and reminders (e.g. timetable changes, library loans); and delivering learning content and revision tips (Naismith, 2007).

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Current research surrounding SMS and clinical placement has primarily focused on the student's experience. A quasi-experimental study was conducted by Young et al. (2010) into the use of SMS to supplement existing support mechanisms for second year nursing students whilst attending clinical placement. Both qualitative and quantitative data were collected and found that the majority of students liked being able to SMS their university teacher and felt that the SMS system was easier to use than email or telephone. MacKay and Harding (2009) completed a quasi-experimental study to assess the value of SMS in providing support to student nurses during clinical work experience. This study found that students felt supported and motivated with enhanced communication during clinical placement (MacKay and Harding, 2009).

Naismith (2007) examined effective use of SMS communication in higher education in the United Kingdom by developing and trialling an email subscribed SMS service for students in one institution. Naismith (2007) found this service to be a timely reminder for contact with the university and an effective communication strategy. Sending and receiving SMS is a time efficient way of communicating (Christol, 2009).

SMS use can create a sense of being in social contact with others and can keep you 'in the loop', giving the user control and flexibility to send and receive messages at any time (Horstmanshof and Power, 2005). Previous trials have shown that institutionally initiated SMS can promote group interactivity (Scanlon and Issroff, 2005; Markett et al, 2006) and a cross-sectional study conducted by Ramanadhan et al. (2009) found a connection between staffing teams assisted in the transfer of knowledge. Garner et al. (2002) suggest that use of SMS may promote involvement in a community of learners, thus reducing feelings of isolation through promoting a sense of community.

Research surrounding the use of SMS and clinical facilitators supporting students on clinical placement is limited. Hyrkas and Shoemaker (2007) used a descriptive correlational design to survey preceptors of student nurses and newly employed nurses. A statistically significant positive correlation was found between clinical facilitator's perceived level of support and their commitment levels to their role (Hyrkas and Shoemaker, 2007).

According to a study by Watson (2000), clinical staff perception of support is directly related to the opportunities to talk to academic staff. Clinical facilitators feel better able to meet the obligations of the role if they perceive that they were receiving support and had a collaborative relationship with the university (Öhrling and Hallberg, 2001; Yonge et al, 2002).

A study examining the lived experience of workplace supervisors of students in teaching, nursing and social care education; report that limited contact between coordinating academics and professionals in the field causes frustration (Löfmark et al., 2008). Without strong collaboration between the university and clinical facilitators, the quality of student supervision is questionable (Löfmark et al., 2008).

Anecdotally, clinical facilitators often request support from coordinating academics in relation to information about curriculum, expectations and assistance to manage students who are not meeting competency standards and require supportive interventions. The advantage of being able to send an SMS to many recipients at once is that it helps to provide support and create a collaborative environment whilst utilising time more efficiently. The aim of this research was to explore the use of SMS for coordinating academics and clinical facilitator communication.

Methods

A descriptive survey was used to explore the use and perceptions of SMS communication for clinical facilitators. The specific questions the survey sought to answer were:

1. Is using SMS a convenient method of communication between the coordinating academics and clinical facilitators?
2. Does using SMS improve communication between coordinating academics and clinical facilitators?
3. Do clinical facilitators report feeling more supported due to the use of SMS?
4. Do clinical facilitators report feeling part of the teaching team due to the use of SMS?

Setting

The research was conducted at a large Australian metropolitan university. The university's School of Nursing is located on one metropolitan and one regional campus, with approximately 2900 continuing undergraduate students across the three-year Bachelor of Nursing course. The course consists of twenty-four units (subjects) delivered over six semesters (three years full time).

Clinical placement, an integral component of the Bachelor of Nursing course, is offered in every semester at a wide range of healthcare facilities in various locations from community, primary healthcare, residential facilities and acute care hospital settings. During off-campus clinical placement, students are assisted by clinical facilitators, responsible for assessing students' performance against a set of competencies in the workplace. Clinical facilitators may supervise students in one of two models; either supervising a group of up to eight students or working one to one with a single student, referred to as preceptoring.

Participants

All 46 clinical facilitators, working with first and second year Bachelor of Nursing students in November and December 2011, were approached to participate in this study. Of this cohort, 24 clinical facilitators were seconded by the healthcare facility, 19 were employed directly by the university and 3 worked in preceptor roles. All participants had access to a mobile phone with SMS capability.

The role of the clinical facilitator is to support students to meet learning objectives of the unit, to act as a professional role model and assess student competence. Some clinical facilitators are the only employee working at a facility in this role, whilst others work alongside other clinical facilitators. Prior to commencement in the role, clinical facilitators are provided with training in the form of a workshop, which covers crucial aspects of the role and provides access to resources, useful strategies and support networks. Clinical facilitators also have access to online resources, a dedicated clinical placement website, and may attend internal workshops provided by off-campus facilities.

Instrument

The authors developed a 15-item questionnaire for clinical facilitators with reference to existing literature and their respective coordinating academic and clinical facilitation experiences. Twelve items used categorical five point Likert scales and three items used open-ended questions. Five items assessed age, gender, experience, highest educational qualification and current use of SMS. The remaining seven items addressed the convenience of SMS regarding timing of messages, perceived approachability of the coordinating academic and satisfaction with SMS.

The survey instrument was tested for content validity (Creswell, 2009; Creswell and Plano Clark, 2007) in a pilot test prior to distribution with three participants (two experienced clinical facilitators and one senior coordinating academic), and minor revisions were made on the basis of their feedback.