



Who wants to work with older people? Swedish student nurses' willingness to work in elderly care—A questionnaire study[☆]



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Accepted 5 March 2015

Keywords:
Career
Clinical learning environment
Older people
Student nurses

SUMMARY

Background: The aging population is a globally recognized challenge for the health care service. The growing number of older people will probably lead to increased demands for nurses working in elderly care. Clinical practice has been shown to have an impact on how student nurses perceive a particular field of nursing.

Objectives: To compare perceptions of the clinical learning environment in nursing homes among students considering a career in aged care or not, and to examine the difference in age, gender and previous working experience as health care assistants in elderly care between the two groups.

Design: This was a cross-sectional study using the Swedish version of the Clinical Learning Environment and Nurse Teacher evaluation scale.

Methods: Consecutive sampling was performed over three semesters from September 2011 to December 2012. The survey was conducted with 183 student nurses. Mann–Whitney U-test was used to examine differences in relation to two groups namely student nurses who did or did not consider to work in elderly care. A chi-square test of independence was performed to examine the difference in age, gender and previous working experience between the two groups.

Results: The analysis leaned towards an overall positive evaluation of the clinical learning environment with more positive values for students considering a career. There were no significant differences between younger students (18–23) and older students (24–50) regarding willingness to work in elderly care or not. Neither was any significant difference displayed between students, based on gender nor for previous work experience.

Conclusion: Age, gender and previous work experiences as health care assistants did not impact on students' willingness to work in elderly care. Future studies need to acknowledge the complexity of why student nurses choose a particular pathway in nursing by longitudinal studies following cohorts of students during the course of the nursing programme.

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Introduction

The ageing population is a globally recognised challenge for the health care services, even though a substantial number of people over the age of 65 will be living long and healthy lives. However, at the other end of the scale there is a growing number of older people with complex and multiple diagnoses in need of advanced health care (WHO, 2011). Therefore, the demand for registered and specialised

nurses working in nursing homes and home-based care for older persons will probably explode. In Sweden, recent reports predict that the population of those aged 65 or over will increase from 19% in 2013 to 25% in 2050 (Statistics Sweden, 2014). This coincides with a report from the Swedish National Board of Health and Welfare (2012) concluding that only 1.6% of the registered nurses in Sweden are specialised within geriatric care, and it is concluded that this poses a serious threat to a vulnerable population. It is therefore, alarming when student nurses describe elderly care as a less desirable area for future work (Shen and Xiao, 2012), as undemanding and depressing (Carlson, 2013a, 2013b), and repetitive and unchallenging (Gould et al., 2013) attitudes which have been attributed to limited theoretical and clinical experience with older people (Herdman, 2002; McCann et al., 2010). Consequently, preparing student nurses to meet the demands of an ageing population is a challenging and acute task for nurse educators not only in Sweden, but also internationally.

[☆] *Funding statement:* This research was made possible by generous grants funded by the Postdoctoral Programme for Quality Development in Higher Education at Malmö University, Sweden.

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Background

It is well known, that clinical practice where student nurses are exposed to appropriate and relevant learning opportunities is of great importance not only to clinical learning processes, but also to how student nurses perceive a particular field of nursing (Marsland and Hickey, 2003; Duggan et al., 2013; Kristofferzon et al., 2013), as well as influencing future work decisions (Abbey et al., 2006). These perceptions may be affected through the socialisation process in academia and clinical settings (Phelan, 2011) as well as by the lay- and media informed picture of nursing, usually portrayed as acute care in highly advanced and technical environments (Herdman, 2002). Several previous studies have concluded that working with older people is less valued by student nurses, and the intention of working with older people declined as the student nurses progressed through the nursing programme (Stevens and Crouch, 1995; Abbey et al., 2006; Stevens, 2011). Nevertheless, when student nurses, during clinical practice in nursing homes, experienced what they perceived as the registered nurses' independent and autonomous work in a less stressful environment they were inclined to work with older people and favour a career in elderly care (Carlson, 2013a, 2013b).

Without being prepared with sufficient theoretical knowledge and practical skills in relation to the care of older people, and without proper support from preceptors during clinical practice (Shen and Xiao, 2012) students' preconceived view of elderly care as a less desirable area might be reinforced. On the contrary, Duggan et al. (2013) presented how some students were challenged by poor and ritualistic care practices, thus prompted to consider working with older people to make a difference, and suggested that nursing curricula focus the complexity of care of older people. This is in line with a previous study by McCann et al. (2010) concluding that nursing curricula need to address misconceptions and even stigmata about certain patients. This is further supported by Neville et al. (2014) concluding that clinical placements for student nurses should include not only long term care facilities, but also healthy ageing clinics or other areas of older people health promotion, thus presenting a more positive picture of older people. In a previous study by Carlson and Idvall (2014) Swedish student nurses' experiences of the clinical learning environment in elderly care were investigated. Although, the clinical learning environment was highly valued by students, and in particular the relationship with the preceptor, no conclusions could be drawn whether the students considered working with older people after graduation or not. Therefore, in light of the anticipated need for registered nurses working with older people the current study extended the scope and incorporated the issue of career intentions in an attempt to further the understanding of recruitment to a much needed area. The objectives of the current study were to compare perceptions of the clinical learning environment in nursing homes among students considering a career in aged care or not, and to examine the difference in age, gender and previous working experience as health care assistants in elderly care between the two groups.

Methods

Design

This was a cross-sectional and comparative study. Data were obtained by means of the Swedish version of the Clinical Learning Environment and Nurse Teacher (CLES + T) evaluation scale (Johansson et al., 2010; Saarikoski et al., 2008).

Participants

Consecutive sampling was performed over three semesters commencing in September 2011 through December 2012. Invited to

participate was a convenience sample of first year student nurses (n = 341).

Setting

At the university where this study took place, student nurses are attending a five week long compulsory clinical placement in a nursing home during the first year of the three year baccalaureate nursing programme. In Sweden, nursing homes are run by either local municipalities or private organisations (for example companies or trusts), however, the local authorities retain the ultimate responsibility for the quality of the care. The nursing homes provide care for patients in need of advanced medical and nursing care as well as offer daytime activities and rehabilitation. Each student is supervised by a personal preceptor who is a qualified and registered nurse. The preceptor is responsible for teaching during clinical practice, including reflection, feedback, and evaluation (Carlson, 2013a, 2013b). Nurse teachers (NT) in this study as well as in previous studies by Saarikoski et al. (2008, 2013) are qualified nurse teachers employed by the educational setting. In the current study, the role of the NT in clinical practice is to be part of the formative assessment after two weeks, and the final assessment and grading of students at the time of completion of the clinical placement after five weeks. In addition, the NT is available via e-mail or telephone contact for students and preceptors if any concerns in relation to student performance or preceptor support should arise.

Data Collection

Data was collected by the Swedish version of the Clinical Learning Environment and Nurse Teacher evaluation scale (Johansson et al., 2010; Saarikoski et al., 2008). The Swedish version of the instrument has been proven to be valid and reliable as Johansson et al. (2010) reported Cronbach's alpha at 0.95 for the total scale, varying between 0.75 and 0.96 for the sub-dimensions. The 34 items cover five different sub-dimensions: *Pedagogical atmosphere on the ward (nine items)*, *Leadership style of the ward manager (four items)*, *Premises of nursing on the ward (four items)*, *Supervisory relationship (eight items)*, and *Role of the nurse teacher in clinical practice (nine items)*. The items are rated on a five-point Likert scale ranging from: fully disagree (1) to fully agree (5) (Johansson et al., 2010). For the current study, background variables for age, sex, and previous experience as health care assistants in elderly care (Yes/No) were added. Further, one open question was added and phrased as: *based on your experience, from this clinical placement in a nursing home, would you consider working with older people?* Students were instructed to answer Yes/No. The survey was distributed after completion of clinical practice during mandatory lectures and handed out by the first author (EC). The students were asked to voluntarily fill in the questionnaires, and return them by leaving the form upside down on their desk; thus minimizing the risk of coercion. Completing the questionnaire was regarded as students giving their informed consent to participate. None of the researchers were neither known to the students beforehand, nor involved as lecturers at any time afterwards.

Ethical Considerations

The study was approved by the Ethical Advisory Board at Malmö University. Prior to the study, participants received written information which was posted on the students' virtual learning platform. The information provided students with the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of participation, and the question of confidentiality. It was pointed out that non-participation would not affect the individual student in any sense.

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