



Development of a virtual learning environment to enhance undergraduate nursing students' effectiveness and interest in working with older people

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Summary Throughout the world populations are aging and there is a concomitant global need for increasing numbers of nurses who are skilled in working with older people. The aim of this study was to develop a web-based resource for use in nursing schools to help educate undergraduate nursing students about working effectively with older people. This paper details the process of developing the working with older people website, www.workingwitholderpeople.edu.au, which was launched at the end of 2006. The working with older people website was designed for use as a stand alone or self directed program and/or as a set of modules suitable for integration within individual undergraduate nursing programs. The resource is unique in its portrayal of older adults and the challenges they face in a way that is appealing to undergraduate students, and engages them in meaningful learning activities, based on authentic cases, while also providing comprehensive resources and links.

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Introduction

The demographic profile of the developed world, and much of the developing world, has changed significantly over the past century and is predicted to continue to do so into the foreseeable future (World Health Organisation, 2002). Whilst there were 600 million people aged 60 years and over in 2000, it is estimated there will be 1.2 billion by 2025 and 2 billion by 2050 (World Health Organisation, 2002). This is no longer just a trend in affluent nations – at the end of the 20th century, more than half of people aged 65 years or older were living in developing countries; with this figure set to rise to nearly 70% by 2025 (Marks and McQueen, 2002). Health services need to be prepared for the changing patient demographic. For example, in Australia, people aged over 65 years currently use 46% of acute hospital bed days and represent 33% of hospital separations (AIHW, 2002). In the US, the probability of long-term institutionalisation is 60% for those older than 85 years (WHO, 2001). This places increasing demands on health services to be prepared and equipped to provide quality care for older adults, not only in specialised aged care services, but also in generalised health services.

An important component of our preparedness to care adequately for our older citizens is the training of a healthcare workforce, in order to properly meet this need. In the WHO (2001) policy document, *Towards an International Consensus on Policy for Long-Term Care of the Ageing*, there is an emphasis on both standards of care and specialised training and education for formal care givers. Similarly, the National Service Framework for Older People in the UK (2001) explicitly focussed on the increasing need for education and training. In particular, it has been recognised that nurses and care assistants form the majority of the workforce caring for older people, and there is a need for undergraduate nursing students, in particular, to be specifically prepared to care for older people (Drennan et al., 2004; Wanless, 2001). Nurses are the main group of health professionals caring for older adults, so it is essential that all undergraduate nursing students receive appropriate education and training in aged care (Queensland University of Technology School of Nursing, 2004).

Recognising the need for the healthcare workforce to respond to the changing composition of the population, Australian government representatives began discussions in 2001 with the Council of Deans of Nursing regarding the need to enhance aged care education to meet the demand for improved quality in nursing services for the older

population (Queensland University of Technology School of Nursing, 2004). Some of the issues raised in these discussions included: the lack of awareness of aged care content in university courses; the lack of enthusiasm among nurses to work or study aged care; and, the general poor image of aged care nursing within both the profession itself and the community (Commonwealth Department of Health and Ageing, 2002a). Clearly, there is a need to promote aged care nursing and to change perceptions of working with older members of the community, amongst nursing students and professionals.

Background

In 2002–2003, the Australian government budgeted over \$26 million for initiatives to encourage nurses to enter or re-enter aged care nursing, including the granting of undergraduate scholarships in aged care nursing (Commonwealth Department of Health and Ageing, 2002b). In late 2002, a meeting of university academics, Nurses' Registration Boards, Council of Deans of Nursing, and aged care sector stakeholders was held with the aim of determining the extent of existing aged care content in nursing undergraduate curricula, and to discuss how the Government's budget initiatives might be best supported (Commonwealth Department of Health and Ageing, 2002b). Several aspects of undergraduate aged care curricula were identified as less than optimal and little uniformity was found from one university to the next. Aged care nursing content was not always well integrated into the overall curricula and tended to be biased toward acute care practices. Another problem identified was the inconsistency across universities in terms of resources and academic capacity to teach aged care nursing (Commonwealth Department of Health and Ageing, 2002b).

National reviews of undergraduate nursing curricula have suggested educational preparation of undergraduate nurses in the area of aged care may not always be adequate (Pearson et al., 2002) and this is exacerbated by difficulties in obtaining quality clinical placements in aged care environments (FitzGerald et al., 2001; Nay, 2002).

To address these issues, the Department of Health and Ageing commissioned the development of the aged care core component in undergraduate nursing curricula principles paper in 2003 (Queensland University of Technology School of Nursing, 2004). This project involved extensive consultation with representatives from professional nursing bodies, academia, aged care industry stakeholders,

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