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Full Length Article

Scholarship in nursing: Degree-prepared nurses versus diploma-prepared nurses

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ABSTRACT

Background: The nursing profession needs nurses with a higher level of education and not merely more nurses to enhance patient outcomes. To improve quality patient care the nursing discipline needs to be advanced through theory development and knowledge generation, thus graduate nurses. Nursing scholarship cannot be limited to nurse academics, but is the responsibility of every nurse.

Although the world is looking towards combating the decline in nursing numbers with better educated nurses, South Africa is planning to address the problem with more lower qualified nurses.

Aim: The aim of this study being reported here was to establish whether degree-prepared nurses in South-Africa partake more often in scholarly activities than diploma-prepared nurses.

Method: A cross-sectional descriptive design was used. The population was all professional nurses registered with the South African Nursing Council who obtained either a four year degree or four year diploma in nursing. Data were gathered from 479 respondents, using a self-administrative questionnaire.

Results: Three times more nursing educators ($n = 19$) achieved a degree as first qualification than their colleagues ($n = 6$) who achieved a diploma as first qualification. All but one ($n = 18$) nursing educators who obtained a degree as first qualification are educators in the private sector that include both universities as well as nursing colleges of private hospital groups.

Data further revealed that most nurse educators and those in managerial positions were degree prepared. More degree prepared nurses than diploma prepared nurses were actively involved in scholarly activities such as research (30,5% compared to 25,5%) and implementing best practice guidelines (62,2% compared to 55,9%).

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Conclusion: The global nursing crisis, nor the nursing profession, will benefit by only training more nurses. The profession and the health care sector need more degree prepared nurses to improve scholarship in nursing.

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1. Introduction

The various entry levels into nursing practice have been contentious and the topic of discussion amongst policy makers, researchers and the nursing profession. The necessity of graduate education for nursing and midwifery has therefore also been debated (Swindells & Willmott, 2003) and an all-graduate profession has been considered and recommended (Beach, 2002). Contrary to Beach's viewpoint, many stakeholders are of the opinion that all cadres of nurses are needed in the profession. Practice leaders and researchers indicate that, although diploma and degree programmes contain the same content, degree programmes provide students with a more in-depth study of the physical and social sciences, nursing research, leadership and management, as well as community and public health nursing (Johnston, 2009).

However, no differentiation between degree-qualified and diploma-qualified nurses occurs in clinical practice currently. The duration of both the degree and diploma programmes is four years. On exiting the programmes all diplomats and graduates, register with the South African Nursing Council as a general, community health- and psychiatric nurse and midwife. Furthermore, there is no salary or rank differentiation between the two groups of registered nurses.

There is an increase in public recognition of nurses' significant role to shape the future of healthcare through evidenced based care, therefore the demand for more degree-prepared nurses become evident (Beach, 2002). Many countries such as Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Norway, Spain, and others requires a bachelors degree as entry into professional nursing (Aiken et al., 2014). Doctoral prepared nurses could significantly contribute towards building an evidence-based pool of nursing knowledge, furthering nursing and nurses' scholarship.

2. Literature review

Scholarship in nursing is defined as “not only research (the scholarship of discovery) but also the scholarship of integration (critical thinking), the scholarship of application (knowledge translation), and the scholarship of teaching. The meanings of these four forms of scholarship are “separate yet overlapping” (Boyer and Rice as cited in Glassick, 2000). The scholarship of discovery refers to nursing research that includes interdisciplinary and collaborative research to improve practise and healthcare while the scholarship of integration emphasises the interconnection of ideas that can bring new insight. The transfer of the science and art of nursing from the expert to the novice nurse can be defined as the scholarship of

teaching. Scholarship of practice (application) has emerged as a critical component in clinical competence; thus, it encompasses all aspects of nursing care where solving healthcare problems are evident (Glassick, 2000). Nurse clinicians should at the minimum be able to demonstrate critical thinking (scholarship of integration) and implement best available evidence in practice (scholarship of application). Incompetence in these two types of scholarly activities may directly impede quality of care.

Increasing the number of lower cadre may challenge the quality of nursing care. There is strong evidence that the mortality rate of hospitalised patients decrease when the majority of nursing staff are degree qualified (Aiken et al., 2014). Furthermore, degree prepared nurses and nurse researchers are needed to advance evidence based practice as well as the science of nursing. Such evidence-based practice will free the profession from the bondage of “traditional” practices as well as from the unconsidered application of theory into practice (book knowledge).

Although all cadres of nurses are valued and needed in the profession, diploma qualified nurses alone will not address the health needs of a country. In addition to the need of improving quality patient care, the discipline and science of nursing needs advancement. Nurse researchers are needed to conduct research, disseminate research findings and translate knowledge in order to improve and advance nursing practice. Nursing scholarship can no longer be limited to nurse academics with masters and doctoral degrees; much rather is it the responsibility of every nurse working in a healthcare setting (Stockhausen & Turale, 2011). Research that addresses nursing practice provides examples of scholarship of discovery, which are further enhanced by the implementation of best practice guidelines (Robert & Pape, 2011). The scholarship of integration is evidenced by transfer of learning; thereby bridging the theory–practice gap. Improving current nursing practices in a systematic public way, which is open for evaluation and may represent the scholarship of application, is needed.

The heavy disease burden, high acuity of patients and technological advances in health science demand that nurses be educated to solve complex problems and make sound clinical judgements that are informed by best available evidence. Globally building research capacity in health services are of paramount importance in order to produce a sound evidence base for decision-making in both the policy and practise domains (Canadian Health Service Research Foundation, 2008). Researchers have found that generally, degree-qualified nurses have stronger leadership skills; they are more creative, critical and reflective and bring about change more often than lower-qualified nurses bring. Furthermore, graduates have a more systematic approach to

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