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Playing Detective to Enhance Critical Thinking☆

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ABSTRACT

New nurses are expected to critically think and have the ability to quickly identify patient problems at an early stage upon entering the nursing profession. Nurse educators attempt to prepare students to think critically utilizing a multitude of teaching modalities such as clinical experiences, simulation experiences, course assessments, written assignments, and case studies. Although these are useful methods of learning, they do not necessarily initiate the critical thinking process. An innovative teaching strategy such as a reverse case study is one such strategy that initiates critical thinking. Students are given small amounts of information, and then, they identify what is important. They create a concept map, a synopsis, or scenario and apply appropriate interventions specific in meeting the needs of the patient. It makes them critically think, understand the how things are connected, and why certain interventions and actions are appropriate. The method brings together past concepts of learning to current situations, engaging student learning. Using creative and some different approaches will facilitate the critical thinking process.

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When nursing students graduate and successfully pass the National Council Licensure Examination, they enter the nursing profession with considerable excitement about beginning the nursing profession. New nurses have varying degrees of struggles depending on their experiences and self-confidence levels. New nurses frequently have a feeling of being overwhelmed with all the information they need to know and all the tasks they must know how to do. New nurses often encounter phrases like think like a nurse, use critical thinking skills, you have to think on your feet, or you have to be able to anticipate problems. Benner's novice to expert can be used as a framework to guide practice as they develop more competencies (Gardner, 2012). Nurses begin at the novice stage and progress to become experts over time. As educators, we try to prepare nurses for the profession during their experiences as students through work in varied clinical rotations, simulation experiences, course assessments, written assignments, and case studies. (See Fig. 1).

Case Study

Case studies have been used in medical and nursing education for a significant amount of time and date back hundreds of years, with one of the oldest records at New Haven Medical Society in 1788 (Gortner, 1983; Tomey, 2003). The scenarios typically front-load

students with information about a patient's situation or condition and then conclude the learning activity with a standard set of questions. Students proceed to answer these standard questions, and this is supposed to ascertain that learning occurred. A concern with using typical case studies is that answering questions at the end does not necessarily build the capacity for someone to apply the knowledge to actual situations. A creative learning activity to increase the ability to apply knowledge to various situations is by providing an opportunity for students to build the case studies in reverse. Learning in this manner promotes more levels of critical thinking because the reverse case study promotes clinical reasoning skills and helps build confidence in this process.

Reverse Case Study

The reverse case study is an active learning strategy, which can be used in a classroom or clinical setting. Only a small amount of information is required to spark discussions and promote critical thinking (Beyer, 2011; Morey, 2012; Nursing Education, 2011). One might wonder how a reverse case study is built. An educator begins with providing students with some basic information such as diagnostic studies, a set of laboratory values, a list of medications, a limited list of orders, some of the patient's complaints, and vital signs. What happens is students collaborate and identify what the medications are used for and what the diagnostic studies mean. After some discussion, they identify what they think could be the current patient problem, and they also create a history of problems from the information

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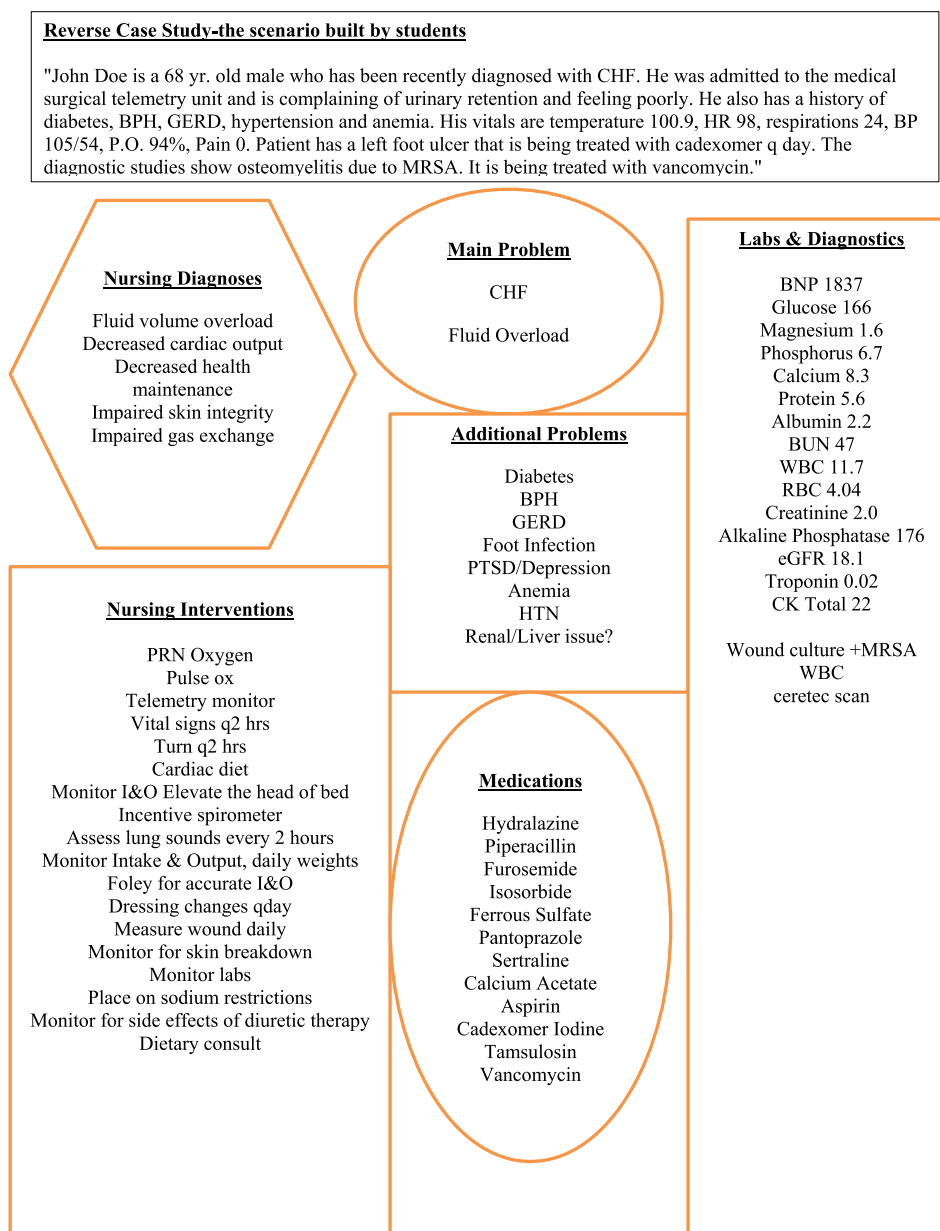


Fig. 1. Reverse Case Study Activity.

provided. The students take the information and build the scenario for the instructor rather than the instructor or educator providing the scenario for the students. The students have the opportunity to piece together what initially started as basically fragmented information to an actual issue where they can apply real-world interventions in how they would care for the patient. The interventions are based on the actual patient problem and history of illnesses, thus allowing the shift from knowledge or comprehension to the application of concepts where the critical thinking process unfolds. Students are playing detectives, and they seem very excited when they connect the pieces of the puzzle. When the connections between concepts are made throughout their educational experiences and upon conclusion of their educational program, they can enter an organization with higher levels of reasoning and considered more advanced than Benner's novice stage (Ashley & Stamp, 2014; Benner, 1984). They have learned to collect data, reason, and analyze information, therefore placing them at the advanced beginner stage.

Benner's Theory

Benner's theory of nursing consists of five levels of performance in regard to situations and experience. The levels range from novice, advanced beginner, competent, proficient, and expert (Benner, 1984). Novices are persons who do not have any experience or judgment in situations and who have limited decision-making skills. They focus on rules instead of being able to process through situations because of limited critical thinking skills. An advanced beginner possesses some experience with actual situations, and the situations become meaningful.

A person is considered competent who practices with knowledge and experience, whereas this occurs after being on the job 2–3 years. A person is considered proficient and is one who practices skillfully and is experienced and organized, knowing what to expect in situations. An expert or practicing specialist has a deep understanding of situations and aspects and possesses intuition.

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