



INCLUSION OF COMMUNICATION SKILL TRAINING IN NURSING CURRICULUM: THE NEED OF THE HOUR

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ABSTRACT

Nursing is not just the ability to perform the routine tasks; instead it is a holistic approach towards the patient care. It is mandatory for all the nurses to possess certain sets of professional behaviours which include caring, compassionate, effective communication, sense of duty or obligation, and collaboration with patients, families and other members of the healthcare team. Effective communication is just one of the many skill sets nursing students must master to be effective in their field. A nurse's role goes far beyond that of medical care. In addition, Today's nurses should be equipped with a working knowledge of medical management, communication skills, ethical/legal issues, end-of-life care, and team collaboration, among others.

KEYWORDS :

INTRODUCTION

Education is more about communication which not only includes hard facts but also thoughts, ideas and proposals which form basis of discussion and debate. The one thing lacking in most education systems is, teaching students regarding how to communicate their thoughts to others. The results of this is producing professionals having good domain knowledge but is unprepared for what the patient population needs¹.

Communication is an important term in English language, the root of which lies in the Latin word *communicare*, meaning to share, and this sharing is of information, knowledge and thoughts. Many spheres of our lives are influenced by communication. Things done throughout the day involve some or the other kind of communication which may be at work, at home, or in politics, commerce, sport, entertainment, the financial world, education, and more specifically, healthcare education. The advent of new and complicated technologies has shrunk our world into a global village. The ability to communicate, not only through verbal means but also non-verbally, has become essential. Students feel the need to communicate successfully through oral and written media for their academic tasks; professionals face numerous challenges of communicating effectively and efficiently in their workplace. Lack of communication and the inability of people to communicate effectively causes stress, frustration, anger, resentment, misunderstanding and disappointment².

Need of communication training

The patient populations in Indian outpatient clinics and hospital inpatient wards are diverse and there remains a significant variation in their spoken language, cultural, educational and social background. The health care giver is expected to individualize the information for each and every patient depending on the diverse backgrounds.

According to the Census of India of 2001, India has 122 major languages and 1599 other languages. The 2001 Census recorded 30 languages which were spoken by more than a million native speakers and 122 which were spoken by more than 10,000 people.(census data 2001)³.

A country which has such a diverse population will have issues related to interpersonal communications in any sphere or life and nursing care is no different. Hence, it becomes essential to have a set of communication skills taught right at the foundation level of formative skills and if possible have some kind of assessment of the same also.

Role modelling and mentoring associated with classical approach to professional apprenticeship has long been a powerful tool. This approach alone is no longer sufficient for the development of a healthcare professional. The domains of attitude and communications with emphasis on ethics therefore need to be taught directly and explicitly throughout the undergraduate curriculum. The two major aspects of teaching professionalism include explicit teaching of cognitive base and stage appropriate opportunities for experiential learning and reflection throughout the curriculum.

Hypothesize a diabetic patient admitted all alone in the Covid ward without any relatives. Lots of steroids injected have increased the sugars of this patient to significant danger levels. To add to it, she is not able to eat the food supplied to her from the hospital due to cultural differences. Imagine the plight of the patient if for one reason or the other the nursing staff is not able to communicate with the patient, the needs of the patient go unrecognised and the disease worsens. Is there a training module which necessarily instructs the nurse (be it in the form of a checklist) or an attitude change which can be measured and checked daily? These necessary skill set go unchecked and unnoticed in our set up.

Scope of communication

Attitude and communication skills are the basis of effective and efficient patient care. Its possible introduction in the nursing curriculum will make teaching/learning of professional behaviours like caring, compassion, sense of duty or obligation and interaction with patients essential to nursing care. Currently, training programmes based on communication skills, are not a part of the nursing academic curriculum. There is a need to develop a teaching and learning module based on attitude and communication techniques and skills which will help the undergraduate nursing students master the necessary skills needed to serve the patients better.

Nursing is not just the ability to perform the routine tasks; instead it is a holistic approach towards the patient care.⁴Attitude and communication techniques are the cornerstones of effective patient care. It has been introduced in the nursing curriculum since many years. It is mandatory for all the nurses to possess certain sets of professional behaviours which include caring, compassionate, effective communication, sense of duty or obligation, and collaboration with patients, families and other members of the nursing team.⁴A positive attitude in any health care profession is not a choice, rather a necessity. The quality of nursing care depends

on the attitude and the communication techniques nurses are using. The patients are affected by everything a nurse or other healthcare worker does. This includes their attitude and demeanor. Patients will feel they are getting compassionate care from an individual who has their best interest in mind. A positive attitude increases the consistency of good performance and improves the patient satisfaction.

Challenges in current scenario

Conventional practice of Nursing has its foundation on acquisition of knowledge, understanding, caring, attitude, competencies and skills through INC's curricular and practice standards. INC has identified communication as one of the ten core competencies a nursing graduate must possess upon completion of course. Twenty hours are allotted to communication techniques and recommends the experiential learning to inculcate these core values. The code of ethics laid down by the American Nurses Association's (ANA) states that, "The nurse creates an ethical environment and culture of civility and kindness treating colleagues, coworkers, employees, students and others with dignity and respect" ⁴. But for a nurse, it is not always possible to show a positive attitude considering the hectic work schedule they are following in the current stressful healthcare environment. That often results in showing the bad attitude towards their patient.

Communication is often taken for granted as a natural process, but it is very central to the nursing care. Communication is a two way process where two persons exchange information, thoughts and feelings⁴. Communication is the major component which is applied in all aspects of nursing care and its interventions such as prevention, treatment, therapy, rehabilitation, education and health promotion⁴. The nursing process is a scientific method of exercise and implementation of Nursing, is achieved through dialogue, interpersonal environment and with specific skills of verbal interaction.⁵ Effective communication requires an understanding of the patient, their problems and the experiences they share. It requires skill and a sincere intention of the nurse to understand the concerns of the patient. It is not only important to understand the patient but also to the nurse must convey the message that he/she is understandable and acceptable. It is a reflection of the knowledge of the stake holders and the way they think and feel within their capabilities⁵.

Successful nurses study communication and interpersonal relations in their education with special courses and internships. They learn the various aspects and applications of communication in different fields of nursing⁵. Importance must be given on communication between nurse and patient and nursing education must focus on communication skills of nurses. Therapeutic communication is not a natural process; it requires necessary training and experience. Communication and education technology is a part of nursing syllabus of all the nursing programmes since many years. Being an integral part of healthcare team, it is very mandatory for the nurses to learn the communication techniques and patient care attitudes.

The necessity for education in communication has been recognised throughout the world. However, the nursing curriculum lacks a set module or guideline on how effective a therapeutic communication should be. The nursing students learn many procedures and skills which are mandatory to deliver effective patient care, but communication and attitude training are yet to get much attention as any other nursing procedures or skills. Most of the students lack the communication skills which are necessary for basic communication in the clinical environment. There are studies suggest that the effective communication skills are taught to students before they enter the clinical environment with the

emphasis on the differences between the clinical environment and the classroom environment⁵. It is a fact well known that in the Rogerian school of psychotherapy, it is regarded as most important that the health care professional enables the patient to formulate/verbalize experiences and feelings in order to gain insight, and also that the patient is free to select which aspects are of importance and which are less of less importance⁵. It is of importance for health care professionals to be able to express acceptance of the patient's point of view and to express comments generated toward helping the patient to awareness and to understand different reactions.

Setting up a Communication Skills Training Program

Various models can be used which could enable adequate training to sharpen the skills required for communication. Based on a recent recommendation,⁶ mandatory communication skills training courses should be made available in the undergraduate and postgraduate nursing training. Whilst longer courses⁷ within the undergraduate curriculum have been proven to be of benefit, not all courses have such modules. Simple areas like how to listen effectively, when to pause, how to allow patients to vent their frustration and how to encounter barriers of communication (like language and cultural issues) can be covered in a short workshop over a few days. A recent meta-analysis of 13 controlled studies of communication skills teaching has shown a moderate improvement in the communication skills following attendance of such courses⁸. Similar results have been reported by a prior Cochrane review group⁹. Following basic course, a further consolidation course was found to improve the skills of the participant further¹⁰. Due to the likelihood of fewer benefits from courses lasting for less than 3 days, the authors recommended that a training course for communication skills should be at least 3 days or more in duration to enable all topics to be covered in sufficient depth. Role plays with experienced facilitators who could guide the learners have been found to help in adequate development of the necessary skills, thereby implying that the skills of the trainers need to be adequately assessed.¹¹ Small group course discussions are preferred to ensure optimal participation by all the group members. A set of objectives must be agreed upon prior to starting the course. Similarly, specific goals on how to handle emotionally difficult clinical scenarios, build relationship and confidence, and discuss complex information with the patient must be covered in these courses. Various methods of teaching have been used, including the use of videos, role plays, and didactic lectures. A validated outcome measurement tool should be used to assess the benefits of such courses.

Two or more learning sessions may be assigned recommended for each semester with ample time for self-directed learning and other learning activities between each session². A case is introduced into a small group and the facilitator facilitates a small group discussion where,

a) initial reactions of the group to the case is obtained b) the underlying ethical, legal and societal principles of the case are elicited c) learning objectives for the case are developed d) learning tasks are assigned for members of the learning groups e) learning resources are identified. The suggested location for such a session is a small group discussion area which requires a small table with seating for 8 - 10 students. Suggested duration for such a session is 1 hour. A board with chalk or marker is also required.

Learning occurs in between sessions by the learners through following: a) Self-directed learning by study of identified learning resources, b) Self-directed learning through study of online learning resources, c) Identification of legal, ethical and social precedents for the given settings d) Obtaining

opinion from seniors in the profession on their impressions on the setting.

Reinforcement of the fundamental concepts underlying the case can be done through a large group learning session (lecture or equivalent) in between the small group sessions. In the second session, the small group discussion is focussed on closure of the case (or the part of the case) for which learning objectives were identified for in the first session. The facilitators may guide the discussion based on the ethical, legal, societal and communication aspects of the case. The group discusses the case, based on the learning done in between the session and provides suggestions and alternatives on the approach for doctors to follow. It must be reiterated that there may not be one correct way to resolve a case. The approach will be to allow students to reflect, make a choice and defend their choice, based on their values and learning.

Training Strategies

A scenario based teaching learning module may be an easy approach in teaching the undergraduates about the most important attributes of patient care, that are a positive attitude and communication skill. This would be easily incorporated in the current syllabus with more focus on the attainment and demonstration of behaviour. This module can easily be adapted in each year of nursing course where the students are expected to meet patients in different clinical settings. It can easily evaluate the competencies learned regarding communication and act as a guide for teachers.

The student should be able to demonstrate interaction with different patients. They should also be able to apply communicative strategies which are relevant in different situations e.g. giving information, gathering information, giving support, obtain compliance and to confront some of the beliefs or values which are contra productive to the treatment. They should develop a repertoire of communicative strategies appropriate to different types of patients, interaction goals and situations to prevent stereotype communication. Both students and teachers need a clearly defined curriculum to direct students' nursing studies and evaluate their communication skills⁴.

A hybrid problem-oriented approach is one of the most effective ways for students to explore the various facets of "real life issues" that will confront them in their careers. In addition to problem solving skills, case discussions promote collaborative learning, team work, reflection and self-directed learning.

CONCLUSION

Communication is not only based on an innate ability that varies from person to person, but also on the necessary training and experience that one acquires during exercise⁵. The need for education in communication has been recognized and accepted worldwide⁵. By better communication there will be to greater understanding among patients with greater benefit to patients and personal satisfaction to nurses in the performance of nursing⁵. There is a need to develop a teaching and learning module on attitude and communication techniques which will guide the undergraduate nursing students in mastering the necessary skills needed to serve the needy.

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