

Implications for the Nursing Workforce in the Middle East

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Investing in nursing education to advance the nursing workforce is a key step to improving healthcare outcomes in the Middle East. Professional nurses can play a critical role in patient education, patient care and patient safety. Jensen (1974) takes the position that the level of preparation of the nursing profession in a given country is a good indicator of the overall development of that country; in the Middle East, the levels of nursing preparation vary considerably. In 2004, Aga Kahn University signed a Memorandum of Understanding with the Government of Syria that will strengthen the academic standards of nursing education, recognizing that nurses are a vital component of their health care system. Higher levels of baccalaureate-prepared nurses in hospital settings have been shown to reduce mortality (Aiken et al. 2004) and have been recognized by the Institute of Medicine (IOM, 2004) as foundational to patient well-being. This paper offers some thoughts on the development of nursing education in the Gulf Region. Countries committed to responding to the changing health care needs of its citizens as their environments change are supported by a well-educated nursing workforce that can respond to both predictable and unpredictable events. The American Association of Colleges of Nursing (AACN) recommends the following curricular guidelines and competencies; this author will comment on each of those areas as well as add some additional recommendations.

Critical Thinking

Nurses are on the frontlines of care and spend proportionally more time with patients than other healthcare personnel. The ability to recognize subtle changes in patient presentation requires a strong scientific background that is foundational to accurate assessment, evaluation and intervention. Nurses are, in a sense, the “first responders” in emerging infections, and often the first to recognize clusters of environmentally-triggered diseases such as asthma. Nursing coursework that emphasizes and tests the ability of nurses to reason an action from a set of characteristics can assist nurses in gaining the insight and intuition necessary to recognize emerging patterns of disease and formulate appropriate actions.

Communication

Nursing education that includes courses on therapeutic communication across the life span and across cultural contexts can assist nurses in gaining, and most importantly, keeping, the trust of patients and their families. Patients may be reluctant to share details of their health history even when those details may offer significant clues to health problems. The ability to write clearly, document findings, and collaborate with physicians is critical to patient care and to the sharing of key information among healthcare personnel. The Middle East countries are in a unique position to develop strong networks among nurses and physicians as the internet continues to be a powerful communication tool; nurses

in rural communities can access current medical information as efficiently as those who practice in urban settings. The Gulf region countries can work together to create a nexus of information-sharing among the nursing workforce irrespective of geography.

Illness and Disease Management

Pathophysiology, pharmacology and nutrition coursework are foundational to appropriate assessment of patients' response to and compliance with therapy and health promotion. Patient teaching is an important nursing function, and nurses can be instrumental in patients' understanding of their health and wellness. A well-educated nursing workforce can transmit appropriate nutritional information; this may be an important function as the obesity epidemic spreads to the Gulf Region. It is well known that obesity is associated with the development of diabetes, cardiovascular disease and with increased cancer risk.

Advocacy/Media/Public Health

Nurses are uniquely positioned between the physician and the patient, with a duty to both. Learning to negotiate is part of the diplomacy often required to assist in a patient's recovery from illness, ability to stay healthy, or to face death. The identification of public health issues by professional nurses can be done in partnership with the Middle East communities, to ensure a goodness of fit between the health needs of patients and nursing response. Faculty of the Schools of Nursing can identify community leaders who can assist in placing students in appropriate learning milieu and can be crucial partners in solving community-based problems. Those partnerships can grow into long-term commitments between nurses and the communities that supported their study. Professional nurses can learn to work with media sources to mount important informational campaigns and increase public awareness on issues of risk reduction, such as the dangers of exposing children to second-hand smoke or to other environmental hazards. The media are well established in the Gulf region and could be important allies in nursing-led health education campaigns. Patients' exposure to the nursing role can also increase their confidence in the nurses who care for them.

Information and healthcare technology

As healthcare becomes more sophisticated, the ability to manage large amounts of medical information is critical. Nursing education that includes training in researching information and examining the best and most current evidence will assist the profession in maintaining the highest standards. Learning to care for patients presents issues of patient safety in nursing education. In reality, clinical education often rests on the assumption that the least experienced person will care for the sickest patient; practice is fundamental to an applied science such as nursing. A nursing curriculum that includes high-fidelity simulation and the use of standardized patients to identify the human factors related to medical error can allow for students' performance to be practiced and evaluated without harm to patients. Simulation centers are costly; the Middle East could become a center

of medical excellence if assured that this adjunct to pedagogy would protect its citizens and develop its nursing workforce.

Additional Recommendations

Recruitment of Faculty and Nursing Students

The ability to attract Master's-prepared or doctorally-prepared nursing faculty is foundational to attracting the brightest nursing students and ultimately in influencing a talented nursing workforce. Faculty salaries that are consistent with other professional salaries and incentives for educators that include support for faculty development will help faculty remain current and committed. Recruiting nursing students that reflect the fabric of the communities in which they will work is fundamental to their ability to communicate with and respect the language and culture of the patients that they serve. Recruitment of male nurses within the Gulf Region might be particularly important for those nurses who choose to work with adolescent or adult males.

Licensure and Certification

The Gulf Region countries who are willing to invest in the advancement of nursing can be leaders in protecting their citizens by ensuring that all graduates meet the highest safety standards through the creation of Boards of Nursing that can test and certify those graduates. Schools of Nursing that are regularly evaluated and accredited can and will ensure the public trust that lies at the heart of the profession of nursing.

References

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