

ORIGINAL RESEARCH

Assessment of Nursing Students' Attitudes towards Caring of Dementia Patients

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Key words: attitude, dementia, nursing students, patients.

Summary. Taking care of elderly patients with dementia is challenging as patients have many complex health and nursing problems. The aim of the study was to assess the attitudes of nursing students towards caring of dementia patients.

Methods. A descriptive comparative cross-sectional study was conducted in October through November, 2021. In total, 115 nursing students participated in a survey where 63 students were from the first year and 52 from the fourth year of a nursing program. The response rate was 83.3%. The questionnaire was developed by the authors. The approval of the Bioethics Center of the Lithuanian University of Health Sciences was obtained (No. BEC-SL(N)-17).

Results. The first year students were more likely to take care of dementia patients than the fourth year students (28.6% and 11.6%, respectively). The fourth year nursing students more often than the first year students noted that they were not planning to work in the elderly units (28.8% and 9.5%, respectively, $P = 0.007$) and felt not having enough patience to provide such care (42.3% and 7.9%, respectively, $P = 0.001$). Last year nursing students reported being better prepared to work with dementia patients than the first year students (mean ranks 64.85 and 52.35, respectively, $P = 0.016$) and more often highlighted the high need of hygiene assurance for dementia patients (mean ranks 65.92 and 51.46, respectively, $P = 0.007$).

Conclusions. The fourth year nursing students are less likely to take care of dementia patients than the first year nursing students. Students see the care of dementia patients challenging because of older age and altered mental status of the patient that creates psychological difficulties and requires much more patience in care. Effective learning strategies alongside with the good mentorship relationship and positive clinical training experience of students may help to encourage and motivate nursing graduates to care for dementia patients during their professional career.

Introduction

In the aging population, the number of elderly patients with dementia who require ongoing care increases constantly. According to the Institute of Hygiene in Lithuania, in 2015, dementia was diagnosed in 321.32 cases per 100 000 population. In 2019, 371.74 per 100 000 inhabitants were ill with dementia (1). It is projected that, in 2030, 78 million persons will suffer from dementia, and by 2050, this number will reach 139 million (2).

Taking care of elderly patients with dementia is challenging as patients have many different and complex health issues and nursing problems. For many patients, the most clinically significant symptom of dementia is an impaired cognitive function with early episodic memory impairment (3). Medications used to reduce the symptoms of

dementia and slow the progression of the disease are often associated with side effects that negatively affect sleep (4). In addition to this, for patients with dementia, it is important to ensure the fall prevention (5, 6) and a proper hygiene. Care becomes difficult as patients with dementia may respond to bathing with anger, agitation and refusal to bath, may experience fatigue, weakness, anxiety, and loss of independence. The reasons for refusing hygiene may be unknown space and wind drafts that a nurse has to foresee and manage (7). People with dementia often have urinary incontinence (8) and are at a risk of developing urinary tract infection (9). In this situation, ensuring proper nutrition and hydration is considered the mainstay of nursing care for patients with dementia (10).

Negative attitudes of care staff towards elderly patients in health care facilities impairs the quality of their care. Caring for people with dementia places many demands on nurses who may feel offended and upset when patients are using violence against them

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(11). If nurses do not believe that their efforts are worthwhile or effective, job satisfaction is reduced.

Studies report that less than 5% of nursing students consider working in older people care facilities to be a great choice (12). A study by Chai et al. found that nursing students' empathy during their clinical practice at a gerontology unit decreased (13). Scerri and Scerri found that positive clinical experience is related to nursing students' attitudes, and mentors should assist students during their practice in various aspects of older patients' care (14). The best outcome of positive students' attitude was found when students had their clinical training by visiting and caring for elderly patients at home (15). The experience of students with elderly patients in the community improves positive attitudes more than taking care of such patients in a hospital setting (16). Not only the patient with dementia, but also their relatives are included in care process where cultural aspects of the whole family should be taken into account (17, 18).

Gender and nursing practice experience are factors affecting attitudes towards older people in undergraduate nursing students (19). A positive attitude towards the elderly and empathy to such patients are directly related to the quality of care (20, 21). The aim of this study was to assess the attitudes of nursing students towards care of dementia patients and to compare the two groups of students, i.e., those at the beginning of studying nursing and those during the last year of their program when they already have knowledge on geriatrics and mental health, and have conducted clinical practice with elderly patients.

Methods

Study Organization and Participants. This was a descriptive comparative study. In total, 138 nursing students took part in the survey: 80 first-year students and 58 fourth-year students. One hundred fifteen questionnaires were returned with the response rate of 83.3%. The survey was conducted in October through November 2021 in one university with a nursing program in Lithuania.

Study Instrument. The questionnaire was develop-

ped by the authors and based on the scientific literature (14, 22, 23). It consisted of two parts: demographic variables and statements about students' attitudes towards caring of dementia patients. All the statements reflected three elements of care: psychological aspects, patient safety, and nursing care planning. The answers were based on a 5-point Likert scale from 1 – strongly disagree to 5 – strongly agree. Cronbach's alpha for psychological aspects of the care element was 0.683 (questionable); for patients' safety element, it was 0.742 (acceptable); and for nursing care planning, it was 0.726 (acceptable).

Ethical Consideration. The approval of the Bioethics Center of the Lithuanian University of Health Sciences was obtained (No. BEC–SL(N)–17).

Statistical Analysis. Statistical data analysis was performed using SPSS IBM 27.00 software package. Descriptive statistics and frequency analysis of features were used for analysis of quantitative data. The mean values and standard deviation, minimum and maximum values of the variables were calculated. The Mann-Whitney U test was used to compare the mean ranks between two groups. Statistical analysis of qualitative ranking was performed using the chi-square (χ^2) criterion. The Z paired difference test was applied to determine whether answers of two groups differed significantly and the *P* value was considered significant at < 0.05 level. The Cronbach's alpha was used to check the internal reliability of the scale.

Results

Sociodemographic Characteristics of Nursing Students. The study involved 115 nursing students where the majority of the participants were female (99.1%) (Table 1). The age of nursing students ranged from 18 to 45 years with the mean of 21.03 (SD 3.4).

The first year students were more likely to take care of dementia patients than the fourth year students. The majority (61.5%) of the last year students expressed their unwillingness to take care of dementia patients after graduation (*P* = 0.003). Less than half of the first year students (41.2%)

Table 1. Distribution of nursing students by sociodemographic characteristics (n = 115)

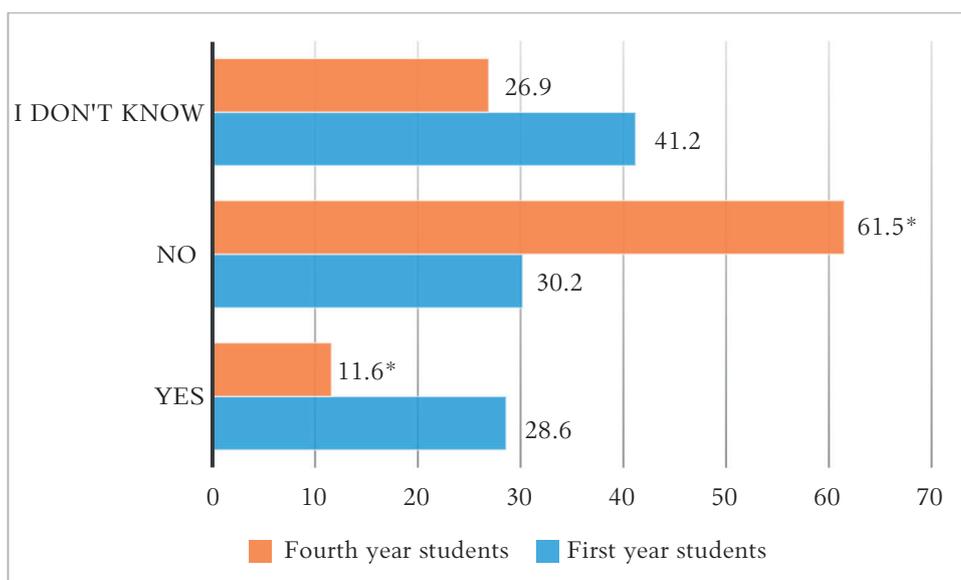
Sociodemographic Characteristics		Total, n (%)
Gender	Male	1 (0.9)
	Female	114 (99.1)
Year of study	First	63 (54.8)
	Fourth	52 (45.2)
Age (in groups, in years)	18–22	96 (83.5)
	23 and over	19 (16.5)

were not sure if they were ready to work in the gerontology units and take care of patients with dementia (Fig. 1).

The nursing students were asked to provide the arguments why they were not willing to take care of dementia patients (Table 2). The fourth year nursing students more often than the first year students noted that they felt not having enough patience for such patients (42.3% and 7.9%, respectively, $P = 0.001$). Last year students more often than the other group thought that such work would be

psychologically exhausting for them ($P = 0.016$). The first year students identified reasons such as psychological difficulties and fears that patients might injure themselves while the last year students most often mentioned simple unwillingness to care for the elderly, lack of patience and psychological burden.

The nursing students had an attitude that in caring for dementia patients a nurse needs patience and to be able to manage emotions. The fourth year nursing students more often than the first



$$\chi^2 = 11.971, df = 2, P = 0.003$$

* z criteria applied for comparing two groups of students.

Fig. 1 Distribution of nursing students by their willingness to care of patients with dementia

Table 2. Distribution of nursing students about their arguments to avoid future professional practice with dementia patients

Argument		First-year students n (%) (n = 60)	Fourth-year students n (%) (n = 52)	P^*
I don't like working with the elderly	Yes	6 (9.5)	15 (28.8)	0.007
	No	54 (90.5)	37 (71.2)	
I am afraid I will be injured by the patient	Yes	5 (7.9)	8 (15.4)	0.169
	No	55 (92.1)	44 (84.6)	
I fear the patient will injure himself/herself	Yes	11 (17.5)	12 (23.1)	0.302
	No	52 (82.5)	40 (76.9)	
I am afraid to face the death of the patient	Yes	6 (9.5)	2 (3.8)	0.208
	No	54 (90.5)	50 (96.2)	
I don't have much patience	Yes	5 (7.9)	22 (42.3)	0.001
	No	55 (92.1)	30 (57.7)	
Psychological burden	Yes	25 (39.7)	32 (61.5)	0.016
	No	38 (60.3)	20 (38.5)	

Note. Students were able to choose several options. *Chi square (χ^2) test.

year nursing students had a vision that a nurse taking care of dementia patients must have good communication skills ($P = 0.011$), be in no hurry ($P = 0.001$), have empathy ($P = 0.001$) and frequently remind to patients things they can forget ($P = 0.002$) (Table 3).

The attitudes of the first and fourth year nursing students about taking care of dementia patients were assessed by three elements of care: psychological aspects, ensuring patient safety, and nursing care planning (Table 4). The highest score by the first year nursing students was given to fear that patients may injure themselves while the fourth year students rated the necessity of hygiene assurance as the main priority of care for dementia patient. The results also revealed that the last year students felt being better prepared to provide care for dementia patients than those students who just started their professional education ($P = 0.016$) and were less worried that patients may injure themselves ($P = 0.021$).

Discussion

This study assessed the attitudes and willingness in nursing students to take care of patients with

dementia during their future professional career. The results showed that nursing students after graduation would not consider working in the units for older people care, including dementia patients. The evidence shows that the approach towards older patients' care evolves during nursing studies with less positive attitudes at the end. We observed that 28.6% of the first-year nursing students were willing to care for dementia patients in the future but only 11.6% reported this option among the last year of students. A study by Stevens also found that at the end of their studies it became the least desirable career choice for nursing graduates to care for the elderly, with only 3 of 150 respondents willing to do that (25). Similarly, Fellow et al. (2007) found that although first year students had a favorable attitude towards older people, most of them did not want to do so after graduation. Nursing students think that caring for the elderly would be not intensive and not complex enough and that this work is depressive and emotionally exhausting dealing with death and suffering of the patient (22).

The care of dementia patients is associated with challenges because of older age and mental status

Table 3. Distribution of nursing students concerning their vision about the personal and professional characteristics of a nurse who taking care of patients with dementia

Characteristics		First-year students, n (%) (n = 63)	Fourth-year students, n (%) (n = 52)	P^*
Patience	Yes	61 (96.8)	51 (98.1)	0.572
	No	2 (3.2)	1 (1.9)	
Good communication	Yes	47 (74.6)	48 (92.3)	0.011
	No	16 (25.4)	4 (7.7)	
Do not hurry	Yes	38 (60.3)	48 (92.3)	0.001
	No	25 (39.7)	4 (7.7)	
Empathy	Yes	35 (55.6)	50 (96.2)	0.001
	No	28 (44.4)	2 (3.8)	
Frequent repetitions	Yes	43 (68.3)	50 (96.2)	0.001
	No	20 (31.7)	2 (3.8)	
Frequent reminders	Yes	44 (69.8)	48 (92.3)	0.002
	No	19 (30.2)	4 (7.7)	
Sincerity	Yes	46 (73.0)	38 (73.1)	0.582
	No	17 (27.0)	14 (6.9)	
Comprehension	Yes	55 (87.3)	46 (88.5)	0.541
	No	8 (12.7)	6 (11.5)	
Ability to control your emotions	Yes	56 (92.8)	50 (97.2)	0.136
	No	7 (7.2)	2 (2.8)	
Critical thinking	Yes	36 (55.6)	30 (57.7)	0.484
	No	27 (44.4)	22 (42.3)	

*Chi square (χ^2) test.

Table 4. Comparison of nursing students about their attitudes towards caring of dementia patients

Statements Mean Rank		First-year students, n = 63			Fourth-year students, n = 52			P*
		min.	max.	Mean rank	min.	max.		
Psychological aspects of care	Patients with dementia make me scared	55.14	1	4	61.46	1	4	0.263
	I feel psychologically ready to work with dementia patients	52.35	1	5	64.85	1	4	0.016
	It takes a lot of patience to work with a patient with dementia	62.06	2	5	53.08	2	5	0.127
	It is difficult to communicate with a patient with dementia	61.79	3	5	53.40	4	5	0.146
Ensuring patient safety	I feel fear of being injured by a dementia patient	62.06	1	5	52.06	1	5	0.090
	I feel fear that the patient may injure himself/ herself	63.92	1	5	50.83	1	5	0.021
Nursing planning	I could care for a patient with dementia at the end of his/her life	61.06	1	5	54.30	1	5	0.252
	Patients with dementia need a lot of hygiene assurance	51.46	3	5	65.92	3	5	0.007
	Patients with dementia have a lot of nursing needs	55.33	2	5	61.23	2	5	0.281
	Many nursing plans need to be implemented	54.66	3	5	62.05	3	5	0.195

*Mann-Whitney U test; range of points 1–5.

of the patient. A qualitative study of McKenzie and Brown reported the belief of nursing students that caring for dementia patients is paid less than in a regular hospital ward, is associated less with skills of nursing techniques and is led by communication difficulties. Nursing students are reluctant to care for patients with dementia due to fatigue and mental exhaustion. They expressed fears for their own safety, as patients with dementia often express violence and are unstable in their mental state (23). In our study, a large group of students in both groups indicated as well that caring for dementia patients is associated with psychological burden and exhaustion.

Personal characteristics play an important role in care of older people with mental retardation. In our study, both, first and fourth year nursing students reported patience as the most important feature in nursing care of patients with dementia. This result

comply with the Meyer et al.'s study where they conducted a simulated learning to teach health care students to care for people with dementia. During this training, nursing students mentioned that the most important lesson they would apply in their practice was to demonstrate more patience. Students realized that people with dementia needed more time to complete daily tasks and more time to process information such as verbal instructions (24).

With the aging population, nurses will have to deal with older people more and nursing students have to be ready for that. Samra et al. (2013) argue that studying older people nursing should improve attitudes of nursing students towards the elderly care. Students need to understand the aging process, the most common diseases and care needs in older age, and to avoid negative stereotypes (26). In our study, the fourth year students were more knowledgeable to identify the personal and professional features

needed by nurses when caring for patients with dementia, but at the same time, their willingness to make a career at this field decreased in relation to the first year students.

During the study process, it is important to use different strategies of students' learning in order to have the best learning outcomes in relation to care of dementia patients. Baillie et al. (2012) conducted a study with nursing students where they analyzed the experiences and strategies of dementia patients' care in acute psychiatric hospitals. Four strategies that nursing students used to care for people with dementia were taken into account. The first one was a patient cognition and relationship-building strategy in which students asked patients about their childhood, how they grew up, where they lived. The second strategy was to involve family members to tell them how they give medication at home, to talk about their favorite food and eating rather than to give up food. Patients with dementia find it difficult to persuade them to eat or take medication because they think everyone wants to poison them. It takes a lot of patience to do that. The third strategy is a flexible and creative approach, according to the patient's needs, preferences and routines. The fourth distinguished strategy of students' provided care to dementia patients was comfort and communication, during which they expressed a desire to be close to the patient, to support them, to let them talk and feel safe (27). Such an educational approach seems helpful in developing nursing students' awareness about dementia patients and training their skills of care.

In addition, encouraging and motivating nursing

students to choose to care for the patients with dementia is important. For example, empathy seminars improve positive attitudes towards the elderly, and empathy skills training has to be considered for inclusion in the nursing programs (21). A good mentorship relationship and positive clinical training experience of students in elderly care facilities might serve as a strong motivation for nursing graduates to consider their professional career as older patient nursing and care of dementia patients.

Conclusions

The approach towards older patients' care evolves during nursing studies with less positive attitudes at the end as the fourth year nursing students are less likely to take care of dementia patients than the first year nursing students. Students see the care of dementia patients challenging because of older age and altered mental status of the patient that creates psychological difficulties and requires much more patience in care. Empathy and communication remain the most important competences of a nurse in older patient nursing.

Effective learning strategies alongside with the good mentorship relationship and positive clinical training experience of students may help to encourage and motivate nursing graduates to care for dementia patients during their professional career.

Statement of Conflict of Interest

The authors state no conflict of interest.

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