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Developing cultural competence as part of nursing studies: Language, customs and health issues

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Introduction: Developing nurses' cultural competence begins with their basic training, and requires them to participate in an array of activities which raises their awareness and stimulates their interest, desire and curiosity to know about different cultures. Students need to be given opportunities for inter-cultural meetings which promote the concept of "culture" and its components, including recognition of cultural diversity and the legitimacy of the other. Importantly, professionals need to acquire specific cultural knowledge and thorough understanding of the values, norms, customs, beliefs and symbols of different cultures. Similarly, they need to be given opportunities to practice the verbal and non-verbal communication skills of other cultures according to their cultural codes.

Such a system is being implemented as part of nursing studies at Zefat Academic College in three study frameworks: firstly, a course integrating nursing theory and practice in multicultural nursing; secondly, a course in learning the languages spoken in Israel focusing on medical and nursing terminology; and lastly, a research seminar on health issues arising from cultural differences.

Methods: Students participating in the "Transcultural Nursing" course come from a variety of backgrounds: Jewish, Arab, (religious, or secular); Muslim, Christian, new immigrant, Ethiopian or other cultural affiliation. They are required to present and discuss cultural practices that affect health. In addition, as part of the language course, students learn and teach their friends 4 spoken and one signed languages (Arabic, Russian, Amharic, Yiddish, and Sign language) focusing on therapeutic interaction and communication using the vocabulary and concepts necessary for the therapeutic encounter.

A qualitative and quantitative evaluation of the process and the results were done using a structured questionnaire which includes a series of questions relating to the contributions of the courses to their cultural knowledge, awareness and skills. 155 students completed the questionnaire.

Results: An improvement in cultural awareness and knowledge among the students as well as in their willingness to recognize the other's difference was noted. Students reported on attitude changes mainly towards other cultures and creation of a positive atmosphere of multiculturalism which was reflected in students' mutual interest and respect. They also reported a deeper understanding of cultural issues relating to health and care (consanguinity and genetics, food customs; cultural events, reincarnation, traditional treatments etc.). The qualitative evaluation raised 3 themes: attitude change, cultural intelligence improvement and exploring cultural similarities.

Conclusions: Nurses' cultural competence needs to be part of their basic training, providing them with the opportunity to be exposed to different cultures especially those which they will probably meet in their work. Nurses' cultural competence need to be based on cultural knowledge and experiential learning methods.

Biography

Mohammad Khatib has completed his Nursing Bachelor (RN & BA) and his Public Health Master (MPH) from the Hebrew University, Jerusalem, Faculty of Medicine. He has completed his Ph.D. at the age of 47 years from Haifa University, School of Education. He is a lecturer at Zefat Academic College, Nursing Department in transcultural nursing, community nursing, and health promotion. He is a community activist through number of health NGO's, health promoter and educator.

His main professional and research interests are Arabs health in Israel, culture and health, community health promotion and health education.

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