



Evidence Summary

Struggling to Improve Our Understanding of Nursing Student Information Needs

A review of:

Gannon-Leary, Pat, Graham Walton, Raffik Cader, Julie Derbyshire, and Ann Smith. "Use of Evidence by Nursing Students: An Interdisciplinary Study." Library & Information Science Research 28.2 (Mar. 2006): 249-64.

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Received: 05 March 2007

Accepted: 10 April 2007

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Abstract

Objective – To identify the sources used by student nurses when undertaking a health needs analysis of particular client groups, and to determine students' ease in accessing source materials.

Design – Case series, incorporating citation analysis and focus groups.

Setting – Honours Nursing Studies program (Adult Branch), Northumbria University, Newcastle upon Tyne, United Kingdom.

Subjects – Citation analysis: 40 students undertaking health needs analysis assignment. Focus groups: 2 groups of 8 students.

Methods – Subjects for the citation analysis were not randomly selected. Citation

analysis was performed and references tabulated using a previously piloted pro-forma. Distribution of references between sources was measured using quantitative analysis. Focus groups consisted of self-selecting volunteers from the student cohort undertaking the assignment. Issues of potential bias/coercion relating to research team members being group participant tutors were addressed. Results were analysed through the categorisation of key themes.

Main results – The mean number of sources cited per assignment was 16. More than half (56%) of the sources were published after 1999. Twenty-nine percent of citations were published between 1996 and 1999, and 12% between 1990 and 1995. Only small percentages were published in the 1980s (2%) and 1970s (1%). Journals (37%) formed the largest body of references, followed by

books at 27%. UK government publications accounted for 14% of total references; Web-based resources totalled 12%. Students acknowledged the importance of supporting assignments with references. Government publications were recognised as high-quality pieces of evidence. Difficulty was experienced extrapolating evidence from different care settings and moving outside of usual parameters. Students indicated that statistical data was hard to find. Those without home Internet facilities had greater difficulty in accessing information than students with such facilities. Support from information professionals was received, but quality was variable.

Conclusion – Doubts exist as to whether opportunities for student learning to inform educators are being fully exploited. Upon completion of assignments students are arguably in a better position to debate subjects more deeply and so advance understanding. Potential for peer group development may be lost. Collaboration between nursing academics and information professionals offers potential for nursing students and health professionals to advance their exploitation and evaluation of information resources.

Commentary

The rise of evidence based medicine has brought into focus the importance of information literacy skills for nurses. Knowing how to access relevant information and apply it is a necessary skill in today's knowledge and information-age world. The primary goal for clinical nurse educators is to enhance students' abilities to identify, read, critique, and apply literature from multiple disciplines to a clinical realm, while maintaining their focus on their health-related discipline.

The exploration of student nurse informatics requirements and the endeavours of

information professionals to understand and satisfy them sustain a consistently steady volume of literature. This study fails to supplement what is becoming an increasingly rich evidence base. Caution should be exercised when considering this study, and the authors do acknowledge the limitations of their research.

The study design is appropriate and clearly described. However, the small population size undermines the validity of the overall study. While small scale studies can provide benefits to a single institution, results from larger populations permit meaningful conclusions to be drawn and applied in a wider environment.

Basic quantitative analysis of citations revealed correlations with previous studies, both in terms of mean number of citations and date ranges of cited material. Distribution of references by media type again correlated with earlier studies. Unfortunately, interesting questions that emerged, for instance whether journals utilised by students were paper-based or electronic, do not appear to have been followed up in focus group discussions.

Qualitative analysis of focus group discussion is limited, and there is little evidence of meaningful interpretation of key themes. Again, interesting issues are touched upon – the utilisation of online databases by students, identification of statistical data, extrapolation of evidence between care settings, and Internet access – but analysis and insight is lacking.

This is a distinctly weak piece of research, compounded by a reporting style rich on citation of other studies, but short of meaningful primary data and analysis. Whilst the study's subjects indicated that to satisfy their objectives they had to think more laterally, this is something that the authors themselves have struggled to

achieve. Consequently, they have offered the wider health community a work of marginal interest that fails to significantly build on previous research.