VULNERABLE TO VIOLENCE

Nursing students are the future of our profession but the realities of their life-world in the workplace is the experience of high acuity, increasing complexity and acute on chronic presentations in people who tend to be older (1). The location of care is also spreading from hospitals to communities, homes and groups. In these environments human suffering, stressful experiences and challenging life transitions are common. Meeting clients’ needs requires nurses to provide holistic, psychosocial care and to cope and rise above constant interpersonal challenges. But coping is progressively more difficult in a climate of financial instability, workforce shortages and increasing workplace violence (2).

Nursing students are particularly vulnerable to workplace hostilities from their more experienced colleagues and experience:

- alienation, isolation and lack of belonging
- dissonance, value conflict and morally constrained practice
- humiliation, belittlement and poor validation of their skills
- incivility and
- hostile behaviours (3).

METHODS

The purpose of this research is to:

1. Explore what nursing students experience as workplace adversity
2. Ask nursing students what exists in the curriculum, and what does not, to prepare future nursing students for challenges in clinical practice
3. Use data-generated narratives to enrich the curriculum so that future students are better prepared for adversity by being able to practice critical reflection and summon resiliency skills.

FINDINGS

Twelve critical events revealed individual nursing students’ feeling:

1. unprepared to deal with a violent mental health client
2. intimidated by a senior colleague leading to a drug error
3. silenced and unable to advocate for clients
4. powerless from being ‘dressed down’ by a senior colleague
5. like an observer rather than a team member
6. disregarded in client assessment due to student status
7. frustrated that previous nursing experience is invalidated
8. excluded from collaborative end-of-life decision making
9. shocked by witnessing a dying man forced to eat against his will
10. troubled by the effects of client ‘labelling’
11. traumatised by witnessing abuse of vulnerable residents
12. shaken up by being forced to shower a client

One painful recollection captured in a narrative

...a lady with dementia, had been there over 200 days .... She was racially slurring at me, calling me names that I would never repeat. She was racially slurring at me because we were trying to shower her, and I felt that we were doing it against her will....and she does have dementia and she is quite violent...but I think that what upset me the most was that the EEN was physically pushing me in the back to get me in the shower with her...the client slammed the door shut and she’s hit me in the head....and they both had a good laugh about it- the RN and the EEN....I was a bit shaken, but I still wanted to help'.

MOVING FORWARD

Nursing students propose that narratives, like theirs, will become stimulus material, and key questions posed, so that future students can be assisted to a) understand what could be ahead of them within the culture b) reflect on what is happening, how it occurs, and how it might be reshaped, and c) share resilience skills and practice using these in role plays, debates, reflective practice and simulation to help them be prepared as change agents and leaders.

In response to student recommendations, a series of lesson plans and assessment pieces are being developed on Understanding power; Relationship know-how, Human agency, Predicting the consequences of actions, and Reflection-in and on-action.

These will be shared in an online community and educators who use such material will be asked to evaluate them and improve their utility.

CONCLUSION

- Transitioning to the workplace requires more than hands-on skills and includes learning to think like a nurse – the ‘Doing’ and ‘Being’ part of the job.
- This can be extended to include ‘Realising’ and ‘Critiquing’. Students can benefit from being forewarned about the culture of nursing and forearmed with skills to notice it, and change it.
- Nursing students who are empowered and have agency are people who can move beyond helpless witness, to helpful leader and work effectively to challenge the status quo – breaking the chains of habit and conflict that leads to traumatic experiences.

Sources: