Does completing a Post Graduate Advanced Assessment and Clinical Reasoning Course Influence Nursing Practice?

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Introduction
Since 2001 an advanced clinical assessment and diagnostic reasoning course has been available for post-graduate nursing students. In this time over three thousand nurses have completed this course as part of their post graduate studies.

The aim of this research was to explore whether the nurse identifies any clinical influence on nursing practice, following completion of a post graduate clinical assessment course.

Methods
A questionnaire, given to students at the beginning of the clinical assessment course, addressed the participant’s perception of their own clinical practice, knowledge and ability to interpret diagnostic tests. The same questionnaire, with some additional questions was given 3.5 months later, at the end of the course.

Two focus groups were completed 3 months after completing the course. The participants in the focus groups addressed the influences the clinical assessment course had on nursing practice. The focus groups were audio-taped, transcribed and then analysed using thematic analysis.

Results
Quantitative
The questionnaire included 50 participants with a mean age of 34.7 years, of whom 81% were female. Half the participants had completed their undergraduate nursing training in NZ with 32% identifying as NZ European. Just over 50% worked within older people’s health, general medicine or emergency. Over half of participants were new to post graduate study. The focus group included 13 participants with a mean age of 34.8 years, of whom 11 were females. The participants were from diverse ethnicities and worked across a range of clinical areas.

The main results from the questionnaire are represented in the table and figures below. Other findings included:
- 80% of participants were taught physical assessment as undergraduates.
- Prior to attending the course most nurses were performing physical assessments on certain patients as part of their everyday practice. When nurses were completing physical assessments, 37% of the participants performed the physical exam in response to symptom onset or patient deterioration. Equally 37% of the participants performed physical assessment as part of their everyday practice.

Qualitative
Several themes came through from the analysis of the two focus groups.
- An increase in overall clinical confidence
- Identifying clinical changes earlier in a patient’s condition
- A greater mutual respect with doctors
- A systematic approach to clinical exam
- Feeling nervous to attend class but excited to learn
  “I felt like a light went on, like, oh I understand this so much better now. Even reading a neuro report”.
  “Been out of school for 20 years. I loved coming to class but at first I was nervous”.
  “Absolutely changed my practice, more confident, really valuable”.
  “Just getting credibility from the doctors. Opens up a dialogue with them”.
  “Improved my practice, especially my assessment skills, it’s definitely benefited my practice”.

Table 1: Diagnostic Knowledge Test, pre and post course. Paired T test.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Test</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>pre course</th>
<th>post course</th>
<th>Δ</th>
<th>95% CI Low</th>
<th>95% CI Upper</th>
<th>P value</th>
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<tr>
<td>ECG</td>
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<td>5.02</td>
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<td>5.22</td>
<td>6.39</td>
<td>1.695</td>
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<td>0.631</td>
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<tr>
<td>BIOCHEMISTRY</td>
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<td>4.96</td>
<td>6.13</td>
<td>1.170</td>
<td>1.796</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Discussion
- This study set out to assess the influence a postgraduate clinical nursing course might have on clinical nursing practice. The quantitative results suggest that knowledge has increased in the interpretation of diagnostic tests.
- Completion of the course has lifted a perceived level of clinical assessment skill and has had a positive impact on clinical practice.
- The analysis of the qualitative data also supports the notion that a post graduate clinical nursing course can influence a change in clinical practice, particularly in terms on the nurse’s confidence and ability to perform systematic assessments.
- A limitation to this study is that there is no control group to draw comparisons.

References