Do Nursing Students' Perceptions of Older Adults Change over Time?

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Purpose:

With the projected increase in the older adult population, it is vital that nursing students obtain the necessary knowledge and skills to work with older adults. Following the phase out of a stand-alone older adult course and integration of the content throughout the curriculum, faculty wanted to learn if students' perceptions of older adults would change over the course of the first three semesters.

Methods:

Older adult content is covered in the first three semesters in the nursing program in health assessment, foundations, adult/older adult (medical/surgical course), and community. Students in these courses were assigned a 1 – 2 paragraph reflective paper answering specific questions related to their perceptions of the older adult. In the first semester, students were asked to describe their perceptions on what they thought it was like to be an older adult in society today. The first assignment was submitted by the students before they attended the class on older adults in the health assessment course. In the following semester in the foundations course, students spent several days in long term care as part of a clinical rotation and were asked to reflect on the life of older adults in that setting. Students take community health and adult/older adult concurrently in the third semester. They attend community clinical rotations in the first half of the semester, then go to the hospital setting for the adult/older adult clinical rotation in the second half of the semester. Two of the three clinical groups were placed in community settings with older adults – one group in an independent/assisted living facility and one group in an adult day care facility caring for older adults with dementia. For the third assignment, students were asked to reflect on their perceptions over three semesters and describe a strategy that would allow the older adult to age successfully at home. The third assignment was due at the end of the community clinical rotation.

Results:

Students’ perceptions of older adults prior to the first class were mostly stereotypical responses. There was strong consensus that they viewed older adults as being lonely and depressed, dependent and unable to travel, not understanding millennials, and not being able to use or learn advancing technology such as computers and smart phones. Following their clinical rotation in long term care, several students stated that their views has changed significantly. Some students were able to reflect on positive experiences, while others focused on negative experiences. Students were beginning to view older adults in a different way and stressed the importance of communication with their clients, showing respect, and providing holistic care. At the end of the third semester following community health clinical rotations, students’ comments demonstrated their concerns on ways to better assist older adults, such as helping them to stay physically and mentally active, ways to keep the home environment safe, and suggestions on how nurses can provide oversight for older adults to maintain health and independence.

Conclusion:

There was a distinct change in students’ perceptions and attitude regarding care of older adults. Their focus changed from thinking that older adults could not learn new things and had limited abilities to wanting to work with the older adults to keep them mentally and physically active and seeing them as individuals with distinct needs. Integration of older adult concepts throughout the nursing program has provided students with knowledge and experiential learning regarding care of this special population.
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Abstract Summary:
Nursing students in a baccalaureate program completed reflective assignments on their perception of older adults over three semesters during the first year to learn if their perceptions changed over time.
Students demonstrated stereotypical responses in the first semester with a dramatic shift in focus by the third semester.

Content Outline:
I. Introduction
   A. Population increase of older adults
   B. Removal of stand alone older adult course
II. Body
   A. Integration of older adult concepts and care across the curriculum
   B. Learn if students' perceptions of older adults change over time
   C. Written reflective assignment in the first three semesters of nursing program
   D. Stereotypical responses from students in the first semester
   E. Third semester responses focused on care of older adults
III. Conclusion
   A. Students' perceptions changed from first to the end of the third semester
   B. More focused on needs of older adults than their own

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Professional Experience: I am a certified medical/surgical nurse, gerontological nurse practitioner, and certified nurse educator and have been a member of Sigma Theta Tau International since 2000. I have 16 years experience in nursing education and am an assistant professor at University of St. Thomas School of Nursing.

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