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Mehtab Qutbuddin Jaffer

Aga Khan University, mehtab.jaffer@aku.edu

Shanaz Hussein Cassum SC

Aga Khan University, shanaz.cassum@aku.edu

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“LET'S WORK: INVOLVING NURSING STUDENTS IN THE CARE OF ELDERLY PEOPLE AT NURSING HOME”

By

MEHTAB QUTBUDDIN JAFFER *

SHANAZ CASSUM **

** Instructor, Aga Khan University School of Nursing and Midwifery.*

*** Assistant Professor, Aga Khan University School of Nursing and Midwifery.*

ABSTRACT

Working in nursing homes is the most challenging task for a nursing staff, but at the same time it can be a spirit jarring experience for young nursing students. From the perspective of nursing students, often students find it difficult to deal with elderly people living in the nursing home. They feel stressed, depressed, and insecure when asked to communicate with elderly people. At the Aga Khan University School of Nursing and Midwifery (AKU-SONAM), baccalaureate nursing students chose an elective course on care of elderly clients, where theory is offered in a blended form and clinical experience is provided by visiting senior old aged home. In this article, the students have two weeks to work with elderly clients, where they plan some interventions based on their assessment, to improve communication with the elderly, to increase their involvement and to advance their health behaviors.

Keywords: Care of Elderly client, Clinical Project, Nursing students.

INTRODUCTION

In the last few decades, it has been observed that people who are older than 60 years have increased in the population (World population aging, 2013). The increase in their age initiates numerous physical, psychological, and social problems in their daily lives. The biggest problem faced by the people of this age group includes psychological changes, as many people experience isolation and loneliness. Some of them live with their siblings, however, many of them stay alone or are sent to nursing homes by their family members and children to live for the rest of their lives; as a result they lose ties with their immediate family members. The literature suggested that psychological factors in elderly people greatly influence an individual's health. Loneliness, boredom, depression, social isolation, ignorance and rejection of individuals in the society are commonest psychological issues among elderly people living in nursing homes (Singh & Misra, 2009). This paper will highlight about the Aga Khan University nursing students project in a course titled “Care of Elderly” at two nursing homes situated in Karachi, Pakistan. During this course, student objectives were to identify elderly clients problems affecting their physical, psychological, emotional,

and spiritual health, initiate a plan of action, conduct health interviews to explore their feelings and concerns and perform health teaching and promotion measures.

Working in nursing homes is the most challenging task for a nursing staff, but at the same time it can be a spirit jarring experience for young nursing students. From the perspective of nursing students, often students find it difficult to deal with the elderly people living in a nursing home. They feel stressed, depressed, and insecure when asked to communicate with elderly people. At the Aga Khan University School of Nursing and Midwifery (AKU-SONAM), baccalaureate nursing students chose an elective course of care on the elderly client where theory is offered in a blended form and clinical experience is provided by visiting senior old aged home.

The objective of the project was to provide opportunity for the nursing students to initiate therapeutic communication, and assessment skills with the older clients, to plan nursing interventions based on their assessment, and to involve them in improving their health behaviors. The students had two weeks to work with elderly clients as well as the management staff of the old age home. When these nursing students were exposed to nursing homes, there was

an element of anxiety and reservation of what nursing care measures can be done for elderly clients in these settings, who seem fragile, depressed and lonely.

At the beginning of the clinical rotation, students were asked to share their view and perceptions about elderly people. Then, they were helped to understand what their myths and realities are. As their first experience, they were expected to explore brief history and to perform a physical examination of an elderly client. Prior to clinical, pre-conference was held in which the basic geriatric assessment, special communication challenges, and various examination modalities were discussed. During this clinical rotation, students built rapport with elderly clients, and identified health concerns and needs on various physical problems. It includes vision and hearing problems, hypertension, diabetes, skin problems and wounds. With the help of facilitators, psychological problems like social isolation, loneliness, substance abuse, sleeplessness, fear, anxiety, and depression were also identified as the commonest problems amongst elderly clients. Given below are some examples of the work done by these nursing students as part of their project work in this course, which benefitted elderly clients and enriched these students learning experiences.

Therapeutic Communication

Firstly, to understand elderly client, communication is an important tool that nursing students must cultivate in themselves to develop a therapeutic relationship with clients. Communicating with older people requires special training as elderly people need special support, trust development, and interpersonal environment in which they can address their personal concerns. Literature shows that there is an ineffective or lack of communication between nursing home residents as well as resident staff to extent of 10.7%, owing to lack of time or importance of communication skills (Sprangers, Dijkstra, & Luijten, 2015). This results in reduced self-confidence among the residents of nursing homes, which lead to further mental and psychosocial distress in the lives of elderly people. During the clinical rotation, nursing students initiate ways to communicate with each other. Not only this, they also build a communication channel between the residents

themselves and among the staff. Reminiscence therapy was done to build trust, relationship and enable clients to open up and share their personal stories of living in an old aged home.

Daily Aerobic and Relaxation Exercises

Secondly, engaging daily routine helps individuals gain stability, remain stress free, prevent memory loss, and stay connected (Palmer, 2012). The activity theory suggests that to age successfully, one must productively engage in a full day of activity to improve their self-concept (Diggs, 2008). Activities to involve the elderly could increase their participation as well as promote social interaction and minimize loneliness and isolation. Lack of time, ill health, access and inconvenience in the environment, lack of knowledge or motivation are some of the barriers that limit the elderly client to engage in activities (Costello et al., 2011). For this reason, students developed an activity schedule and motivated elderly clients to engage in activities such as muscle relaxation exercise, aerobics, and other range of motion that they found enjoyable (Figure 1).

Safe and Clean Environment

Falls are the leading cause of death among the people aged 65 and older in the US, constituting 55% of all the cases. A study reported in 2012-2013 mentioned that the fall rate among people aged 85 and over was 4 times higher than among less than 84 years of age (CDC, 2015). Fall results in increasing injury, decreased activity, loss of mobility, increased dependence on other and importantly psychological distress. In nursing homes, students identified some places; where chances of fall were high. In order to prevent elderly from a fall, certain strategies were



Figure 1. Clients performing aerobics exercises with students

implemented; such as sticking printed posters of fall prevention at all high risk areas, including outside washroom, near elevators, near the stairs, kitchen side, and on slippery surfaces (Figure 2). The posters will remind them to take extra care when moving from one place to another to prevent falling.

Cleaning & Beautification of Home Environment

Approximately 2.4 billion people live in extremely unhygienic environment, exposing them to increased risk of infections and other diseases (Sam-Mbomah & Nyamawa, 2011). Elderly people have weak immune systems and thus they are more prone to infections, and they need to live under a proper hygienic environment, in order to lead a fit and healthy life. The old age home has limited staff and funds, and there was lack of environmental hygiene. Nursing students found dusty floors, walls, stairs and furniture, and cobwebs on fans that made them feel uncomfortable and suffocated. There was a lack of ventilation and staunch odor of cigarette smoke in certain rooms. Students wanted the residents to be aware of the poor environmental conditions in their home and rooms and once they were able to convince the residents, they assisted them to clean their rooms, especially fans and wall, give out extra things from their belongings and unclutter their rooms. Students assisted the residents in dusting and cleaning the senior home and beautified with decoration such as ribbon and paper paintings (Figure 3 and 4).

Stress Reduction and Diversional Techniques

Most of the time, it was identified that elderly people remain isolated, and nobody was there to sit and talk with them. Moreover, they don't communicate with other



Figure 3. Students assisting clients in cleanliness drive in old age home



Figure 4. Students helping clients in beautification of environment & gardening in old age home

elderly people residing at nursing home. Students decided to engage elders in the group and play therapy, which helped them to release their stress and start communicating with others. As a result, they can reduce their isolation. Some distraction strategies initiated were making friendship bands for their colleagues, developing name tags for their rooms, designing paper made flowers, engaging in indoor board games and sports, preparing homemade sweets and pen holders. By this activity, they interacted with each other, and felt



Figure 2. Use of Printed posters for fall prevention



Figure 5. Elderly clients engaged in making wrist bands, playing indoor games, and making sweets

distracted and relieved of stress (Figure 5).

Conclusion & Recommendations

At the completion of the project, the students voiced it as an inspiring and enriching experience, which gave them confidence to work in old aged homes, and plan needed interventions to make a difference to elderly people residing in these homes. Some students even shared how this experience gave them insight to value older people's presence and experience, in their own lives. The elderly clients as well as the staff in the senior homes rejoiced the last day of the project with the students and faculty with food, music, songs and bid them farewell with teary eyes and a promise to bring again different students in the next semester.

The faculty felt that this project provided students a very relevant and enlightening experience, and helped them to fulfill the objectives. The faculty also gained insight on out of hospital clinical experiences, and they were challenged to incorporate in the curriculum, to give real life experiences to learners.

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Mehtab Qutbuddin Jaffer is currently working as Instructor at the Aga Khan University School of Nursing and Midwifery. Prior to this, she has an extensive clinical experience at the emergency medicine as critical care nurse, nurse instructor and nurse specialist. Her specialty is dealing with all kinds of emergencies including adult and pediatric patients. She has written several papers on clinical nursing related topics.



Shanaz Cassum is currently working as Assistant Professor at Aga Khan University School of Nursing and Midwifery. Her expertise is in Clinical teaching, Health assessment and promotion, counseling clients. She has written papers on Critical thinking, enabling learning environment, jigsaw strategy, concept mapping and use of blended learning pedagogy.

