

Expert Holistic Nurses' Advice to Nursing Students

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Purpose: The purposes of this study were to describe the advice that expert holistic nurses gave to nursing students regarding the theory and practice of holistic nursing and to describe nursing students' experience and perceptions of their interaction with the experts. **Design:** This was a qualitative descriptive study. **Methods:** Nursing students who attended the 2008 and 2009 conferences of the American Holistic Nurses Association interviewed expert holistic nurses, asking them for advice for beginners. Students recorded the interviews on paper and wrote their perceptions of interacting with experts. The data were examined for recurring themes. **Findings:** The most common advice from the experts was regarding the importance of self-care, person-centered care, touch, and lifelong learning. Students' perceptions of the interviews included feeling empowered to accomplish goals, gaining a greater understanding of holistic nursing, and feeling admiration for the holistic nurse experts. **Conclusion:** Giving students the opportunity to interact with nurse experts in an individual, informal setting is a useful educational strategy that increases knowledge, promotes socialization to the nursing profession, and offers students opportunities for professional networking.

Keywords: *empowerment; expert nurses; holistic nursing; mentorship; students; education*

Expert holistic nurses have a great deal of experience and knowledge to pass on to future nurses. Nursing students, however, have little opportunity to work with holistic nurses. In this study, nursing students at the 2008 and 2009 annual conferences of the American Holistic Nurses Association (AHNA) interviewed expert holistic nurses, asking for their advice to novices. The students then recorded their own perceptions of the interviews.

Background

For the past 3 years, nursing students from a large private university have attended the AHNA annual conference with two faculty members. In 2007, the students wrote about their experiences and perceptions of the conference (Christiaens, Abegglen, & Rowley, 2008). Their journals revealed that conference attendance made them feel empowered, instilled the value of self-care, and taught them how to apply holistic nursing principles to practice. Their "overall

impressions of the conference were overwhelmingly positive, hopeful, and in some cases life-changing" (p. 144).

Interestingly, students in 2007 reported their most meaningful learning occurred informally in the hallways and during meals, as they networked with attendees between formal conference activities. Acknowledging that intense one-on-one relationships can enhance learning and socialization to the profession (Goran, 2001), the faculty asked subsequent students, at the 2008 and 2009 conferences, to formally interview expert holistic nurses. Students were assigned to ask the experts what advice they would give to novice nurses. This provided students the opportunity for more focused networking and mentoring.

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Purpose of the Study

The purposes of this study were to describe the advice that expert holistic nurses gave to nursing students regarding the theory and practice of holistic nursing and to describe nursing students' experience and perceptions of their interaction with expert holistic nurses.

Method

Participants

The 28 student participants were all Caucasian females in the fourth or fifth semester of a six-semester baccalaureate nursing program. Their average age was 22 years (range = 21-35 years), and the majority of them were Licensed Practical Nurses. They were all enrolled in the Integrative Healing Practices clinical section of a required Global Health and Diversity course. AHNA conference attendance was a requirement for this section of the course. Travel costs for students were defrayed by an internal university grant.

The 15 expert holistic nurse participants were all female. Seven held doctoral degrees, seven had master's degrees, and one had a baccalaureate degree. Six were certified holistic nurses. Their average age was 61 years (range = 47-73 years), and their average number of years in nursing practice was 40.2 years (range = 27-50 years).

Procedures

After obtaining approval from Brigham Young University's Institutional Review Board, a purposive sample of holistic nurse experts was selected from a list of conference registrants.

Experts were defined as those who had at least 5 years experience as holistic nurses. Experts were invited via e-mail to participate in the study. Approximately 70% of those invited agreed to participate.

Students who enrolled in the Integrative Healing Practices clinical section of a Global Health and Diversity course were required to interview a holistic nurse as a class assignment and write a summary of the interview and their perceptions of the experience. They were invited to allow their papers to be used as data for the study and informed that participation or

refusal to participate would not affect their course grade. All invited students agreed to participate.

After consent was obtained from both groups, each expert holistic nurse was interviewed by a pair of nursing students for 30 to 45 minutes. Because of noise, space, and funding constraints, interviews were not audio recorded. One student asked questions while the other took notes. The interview guide contained open-ended questions, such as "What advice do you have for nursing students?" and "Please describe your holistic nursing practice." Students were directed to ask the questions on the guide but also to feel free to engage in a natural conversation, asking any other questions that came to mind.

After the interview each student wrote a summary of her experience and her perceptions of the interview and submitted it to the faculty researchers. After the assignment was graded for the course requirement, the non-faculty researcher removed identifying characteristics of participants and transcribed the raw data, assigning codes to each participant. Identifying codes are known only to the non-faculty member of the research team and are in a locked cabinet.

Using a qualitative descriptive approach (Sandelowski, 2000), the researchers searched the data for recurring themes related to advice given by expert holistic nurses and student perceptions of the interviews. Recurring themes were identified by each researcher separately. The researchers then collaborated to compare results. Consensus was reached, and the most frequently occurring elements were categorized into broader themes with subthemes. Patterns were compared within and across themes to support trustworthiness of the findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Findings

The most common recurring advice from the experts was for the students to care for themselves first in order to care for others effectively. The experts also told the students to engage in person-centered care, touch, and to continue learning throughout their careers. Students' perceptions of the interviews included feeling empowered to accomplish goals. They gained a greater understanding of holistic nursing, especially as it compared with complementary/alternative modalities, and felt admiration for the holistic nurse experts.

Advice From the Experts

Expert advice is not just a collection of facts; it reflects understanding of salience and the influence of context (Bransford, Brown, & Cocking, 2000). Experts notice features and patterns that novices do not. When asked for advice, expert holistic nurses focused on the themes of self-care, person-centered care, touch, and lifelong learning.

Self-care. While caring for others, nurses and students alike often fail to care for themselves (Stark, Manning-Walsh, & Vliem, 2005). Learning to engage in self-care in order to care for others is an essential element in baccalaureate education for professional nurses (American Association of Colleges of Nursing, 2008) and a core value of holistic nursing practice (American Holistic Nurses Association, 2000). The expert holistic nurses recognized the importance of self-care as a first priority and encouraged students to take care of themselves, as evidenced by the following statements.

Take care of yourself, body, heart and soul. Find activities to engage in you enjoy, to restore your sense of self and recharge to prevent burnout and loss of compassion in practice.

We were instructed that you must first take care of yourself before you can fully provide care for others.

The experts offered specific ways students could take care of themselves, documented by stories from their own experiences.

She wished she had done more self-care—which ever works best for us. Maybe that's meditation or physical exercise. She told us to do whatever works best for us to relax and regroup ourselves. She told us to keep our candle lit, honor the holiness in us.

Don't let them beat you down. Keep vision and passion. Everyday find a way to renew that for yourself. It will be different for everyone. A good way is to stop for even 5 minutes to meditate. Stop and breathe and experience the joy of life. Then the other things don't seem so monumental.

Person-centered care. People experiencing nursing care have long been referred to in relation to their disease or illness (Hobbs, 2009). Helping people heal and recognizing individual value was what nursing

was all about to these expert holistic nurses. They suggested that nurses practice from their hearts and not just their heads. To these experts, person-centered care includes the essential skills of asking and listening. They stressed that the person and not the disease is the center of nursing care.

She said, "The Golden Rule is fabulous, but the Platinum Rule is what nurses need to use." She explained, "instead of saying do unto others as you would have them do unto you, we should say do unto others as they would have you do unto them."

Reflect on yourself and put a human face on that person, rather than focusing on the disease. At the same time, before you go into the room, take a breath and remember there is a person in the room.

Experts offered suggestions on how to put into practice the concept of person-centered care.

If you are in a patient's room learning about their disease, ask the patient for that permission. Tell them you are there because you are learning. Then after, tell that person, "thank-you for letting me learn this." Involve the patient and ask them how the student did afterward. Always honor that person.

Being centered on the patient involves being present and practicing more intuitively, from the heart.

Repeatedly [she] emphasized the importance of being present in the moment. "Be in the now" she said, adding that if we stop to pause and ask ourselves what is happening right then, the answers of what to do next will come to us. Taking a moment to stop and think clears our vision and puts everything in perspective. Priorities become clearer, and the patient's needs go to the very top of that priority list.

Several experts mentioned that developing the skills of asking and listening was an essential part of person-centered care.

She suggested that talking to the patient when first entering the room and asking them how they are doing. But after asking she emphasized that it was really important to actually listen to their answers. Then after you have treated them like a person you can treat them like a patient.

You have 2 ears and 1 mouth, so make sure you listen.

Ask our patients, as part of our own holism assessment, "What does this illness/event mean to you?" We will learn far more from our patients' responses to this question than most physical assessments.

Touch. Touch conveys comfort, connection, and intention to heal and help (Chang, 2001; Engebretsen, 2002). The gentle touch says "I am here" and is important to the healing process. Experts said the following:

One of the simplest "holistic" things nurses can do is touch their patients.

Sandwich painful procedures in between touch. Encourage family to touch. Bring touch back into practice.

Lifelong learning. All nurses are expected to engage in continuous professional development and lifelong learning (American Association of Colleges of Nursing, 2008). Lifelong learning encompasses not only formal continuing education but also an attitude of learning from all experience. The experts reminded students that learning does not stop at graduation.

You should stay up to date on the latest literature so that you can back up the changes we'd like to see with evidence.

Keep learning. When you stop learning you should be dead.

Explore widely! See what works for you. Don't get stuck in one place because you'll start thinking in only one mindset, and that's not good.

Experts emphasized the value of good mentors and reminded students to become mentors when they entered practice. Lifelong learning is also about lifelong mentoring.

Find supportive mentors. Find people to support you. Support others as well.

Honor your colleagues. Be good to one another. Recognize the cues that they need support and don't bring them down. In order for patient care to be effective, it needs to have another dimension, the dimension of the supportive teamwork. You just need to be aware.

Student Perceptions

When students wrote about their perceptions of their interviews with expert holistic nurses, their comments were overwhelmingly positive. Students gained a greater understanding of holistic nursing, admired the expert holistic nurses, and felt inspired and empowered to follow their advice. Many said that the interviews were their most memorable highlight of the conference. The following student's remarks were typical:

I felt very encouraged and inspired after speaking with [the expert holistic nurse]. I felt a new drive to be a better nurse. Hearing the advice she gave me was probably what made the biggest difference (it was one of the most memorable experiences of the conference for me). She gave me great confidence in my abilities and ambitions. Her advice also helped me to remember why I decided to be a nurse in the first place: To care for and love people. Often in school we get caught up in the technical things. Our interview with [the expert holistic nurse] put into perspective what I really want to accomplish as a nurse. She helped me to see how I could be a balanced nurse as well (incorporating CAM as well as western medicine). I felt rejuvenated and optimistic after speaking with her. I felt a new desire to accomplish my goals. I felt more direction in my career.

Empowerment. Hawks (1992) defined empowerment as "the interpersonal process of providing the resources, tools and environment to develop, build and increase the ability . . . of others to set and reach goals" (p. 610). Duhon-Haynes (1996) suggested that empowerment provides a "positive impetus to action" (p. 2). When describing their experience with the expert holistic nurses, students wrote about feeling rejuvenated, inspired, encouraged, and determined to reach their goals, which is congruent with the current definitions of empowerment.

Before interviewing an expert holistic nurse, some students were unsure about how they could make a difference or accomplish their goals. After the interview, the following students felt confident they could achieve their goals.

I feel empowered because I can achieve these goals, starting now.

I left our interview feeling empowered, even as a new graduate.

Talking with the expert holistic nurse reminded students of their original desire to be a nurse. This experience rejuvenated and inspired students, reigniting their passion for nursing.

I also found the ideals and concepts I learned about holistic nursing through the interview to be very inspiring and rejuvenating in my passion and original desires to become a nurse. I felt excited to come home to work with my new understanding and renewed passion and love for what I was doing.

It inspired me to go out there on the floor and really make a difference wherever I work.

Each individual principle made us more passionate about nursing and our potentials as nurses one day.

Many students responded with a determination to be more holistic in their practice.

I am determined to be a holistic nurse. I have a goal to treat each patient as an integrated whole. I can promote healthy lifestyles so that I can help prevent disease, instead of merely being involved in the treatment after disease is present.

Holistic nursing more clearly defined. AHNA defines a holistic nurse as one “who takes a holistic (mind-body-spirit-emotion) approach to the practice of traditional nursing” (American Holistic Nurses Association, 2009, p. 1). This definition does not include complementary/alternative medicine (CAM). However, several students arrived at the conference assuming that to be a holistic nurse they had to practice CAM. After interviewing an expert holistic nurse, students realized what holistic nursing really is.

[The expert holistic nurse] really opened my eyes as to what Holistic nursing is. At the conference, I got a little confused as to what a holistic nurse actually did. As I saw the different complementary and alternative therapies used at the conference, I thought this was what holistic nursing meant. Then, we finally interviewed [the expert] and it became very clear. She told us that CAM was not holistic nursing. To be a holistic nurse doesn't mean using CAM. She explained that holistic nursing is a theory, one that guides the way you see your patient and the way you interact with your patients. She said that holistic nurses might be more inclined to use CAM because it helps to bring peace, but it isn't necessary. I was

relieved by her definition and it made me understand why holistic nurses use CAM.

Before the interviews students saw CAM, or integrative healing, and holistic nursing as one entity because many of the holistic nurses who attended the conference used alternative therapies. Although the course instructors taught them about the difference between holistic nursing and CAM in class, it was only after discussing holistic nursing with an expert at the conference that the difference became clear.

I feel like she really helped solidify for me the difference between CAM and holistic nursing. I did not understand how they could be separate because everyone that was holistic seemed to use integrative methods. But it really made sense to me that being holistic was more of a way of life. It was more how you communicated and treated your patients. It makes sense that a holistic nurse would be more accepting of integrative methods because they would allow the patient to use those methods even if they were not the mainstream.

As students interviewed the expert holistic nurses, they began to see how CAM and holistic nursing were not the same but were actually two separate units working together to create person-centered care.

After this interview, I came to understand what holistic nursing is and how it relates to integrative healing. Holistic nursing is caring for the entire person as a whole as opposed to just a body—it's about caring for their spiritual, emotional, and social needs as well. Holistic nursing is a way of being and living, whereas integrative healing is simply a tool you can use to achieve holistic care.

Not only did students understand how holistic nursing could benefit their clients, they also began to understand holistic nursing as a way of life, which further distinguished it from CAM.

To her it's not using integrative therapies or techniques; rather it's a way of life. She's holistic not only in her nursing practice but in all of her interactions with others. I was really glad that she made that distinction because it seems that there are a lot of people who mix up the two ideas.

Now I understand that holistic nursing is actually the way you view and treat your patients and I can bring it into my everyday practice. I loved this new-found understanding because it brought holistic nursing closer to home.

Admiration. It is common for students to develop admiration for mentors and role models (Goran, 2001; Stone, 2000; Thomka, 2007). Students in this study expressed admiration and respect for the nurses they interviewed. They saw the experts as role models and looked up to them for their positive qualities. For the following student, this feeling of admiration extended not only to the nurse she interviewed but also to other nurses at the conference.

I love when she gave the advice to attend the conference because it would give us an "infusion of love." I felt like that was so true. I loved that the nurses at the conference seemed to be so loving and accepting of those around them. I did not feel judged while I was at the conference and it was very refreshing. I felt like the nurse we interviewed was also a great example of being accepting and loving to those around her. I think this helped me catch a glimpse of what it is like to be a holistic nurse.

The students not only admired the women they interviewed but also felt great respect for all they had done as holistic nurses.

Speaking with this nurse was a very rewarding experience because I was able to meet someone who had been into holistic nursing for a very long time . . . I really respected her position and loved what she had to share with us.

Many students saw what these expert holistic nurses had to offer the communities in which they lived and worked and were grateful for their contributions.

I think [she] is a wonderful asset to the community she works in. She really cares about her patients and she is a powerful advocate.

I really admire her. She is doing great things because of her holistic nature, and I feel we are really lucky as a medical community that she is teaching what she knows so others can continue her work.

After interviewing the expert holistic nurses, students were motivated to become holistic nurses

themselves. They desired to follow the example of the experts and be more holistic in their practices and in their lives. The following student identified with the expert.

I am excited to be a holistic nurse and [she] was a great example to me of how this can be possible. I am grateful I had the opportunity to interview her specifically, because her choice of career and the way she incorporates holistic principles resonates with me.

Discussion

The findings of this study were similar to the findings of a previous study conducted by the same research team (Christiaens et al., 2008). In the previous study, student perceptions of attending the AHNA annual conference included empowerment, an appreciation for self-care and lifelong learning, and gaining more knowledge about holistic nursing. The researchers concluded in that study that professional conference attendance was a useful educational strategy with many benefits. The same conclusion can be drawn in this study, adding that a personal interview with experts is a useful and effective way to strengthen the conference learning experience.

Nursing students often experience disempowering, discouraging relationships as they interact with professional nurses in clinical learning situations (Christiaens, 2008). However, nursing students in this study enjoyed empowering relationships with nurse experts. These were formed formally by interviewing experts, and informally as they naturally networked. These findings are not unique to holistic nursing. Stone (2000) found similar results when students attended a state nurses' association conference. Students were empowered and inspired by their interactions with nurse attendees and expressed admiration for nurse role models.

It is clear from this and our previous studies that students felt empowered and inspired by attending the AHNA annual conference. They learned the importance of self-care and lifelong learning as they attended conference activities and networked informally. By adding a formal interview with an expert holistic nurse, students gained more knowledge about the nature of holistic nursing, understood the importance of person-centered care, and had the opportunity to develop a mentoring relationship with a "wise

and trusted adviser" (Goran, 2001, p. 119). Giving students more opportunities to interact with expert, caring nurses will serve to strengthen our profession and prepare students for the often difficult work of caring for others.

Implications for Nursing Education

Conference attendance can enhance nursing students' socialization to the profession, increase their knowledge and enthusiasm about nursing, and give them opportunities for networking and mentoring. Asking students to formally interact with experts at a conference can further enhance their learning and socialization.

It may not be financially or logistically feasible for some nursing programs to arrange a conference experience for their students. In those cases, faculty might consider facilitating individual interviews between nurse experts and students in a relaxed, informal atmosphere. Faculty might also consider giving extra credit to students who attend local professional conferences, such as their state nurses' association convention, where they can interact with experts.

Implications for Practice

In the sometimes rushed world of clinical practice, it can be challenging to attend to relationships with students during busy shifts. The findings of this study suggest that nursing students benefit from individual time with nurses, asking questions in a safe atmosphere. Because of power differentials, it may be difficult for students to ask questions or advice from nurses who are their direct supervisors or preceptors. Establishing a caring, mentor/mentee relationship of respect and reciprocity in clinical settings is vital to ensure that nursing students gain knowledge and are socialized into the profession. Additionally, nurses attending professional conferences can take the opportunity to interact with nursing students and pass on knowledge and advice to the next generation.

Future Research

Most of the students who participated in this study have graduated. It would be valuable to examine how their experiences at AHNA conference affect their current practice. Interviewing these participants could

give educators insight into the value of conference attendance and collaboration with experts. It would also be useful to AHNA to see if students who attended conference continue their membership in the organization.

According to the American Association of Colleges of Nursing (AACN, 2008), a nursing school graduate should be prepared to "practice from a holistic, caring framework. Holistic nursing care is comprehensive and focuses on the mind, body, and spirit, as well as the emotions" (p. 9). AACN also recommends that the study of complementary and alternative, or integrative therapies be included in nursing curricula. Fenton and Morris (2003) found evidence that many U.S. schools of nursing are incorporating holistic nursing and integrative therapies into their curricula. Considering the consumer demand for health professionals who are knowledgeable about holism and integrative care (Helms, 2006; Neal, 2001), research needs to be done to understand why all nursing schools do not include these topics in their curricula. Also, teaching effectiveness needs to be evaluated in nursing curricula that include holistic nursing and integrative therapies. In addition, it would be informative to study how current nursing faculty across the country are qualified and prepared to teach students about holistic nursing and integrative therapies.

Limitations

The study had several limitations. First, there was a lack of cultural, gender, and age diversity in the sample. All the student and nurse participants were Caucasian females. Almost all students were in their early 20s, which does not reflect the national average age of nursing students (Kaufman, 2009). Second, because the interviews were not audio taped, some of the expert nurses' comments could have been lost, because of reliance on students' recall. Third, the student participants were selected to take the course and participate in the research because of their interest in holistic nursing. Students who had no particular interest in holistic nursing might have perceived the experts' advice differently. Finally, because the interview was a graded assignment, students' written perceptions may have been slanted toward what they thought the researchers, who were also the course instructors, wanted to hear.

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