The end of August marks the beginning of a new semester for nursing students planning to enter the ranks of the nursing profession. Each semester, as I begin my Gerontological Nursing class, I ask these second-semester baccalaureate nursing students to speculate on the area of nursing in which they hope to work. Among many responses, I may receive a pleasant surprise if one or two students express an interest in geriatrics. However, based on current trends, approximately all of my students will be working with the 65 and older population. How do we best prepare these future nurses to meet the needs of the burgeoning older adult population?

According to current estimates, Baby Boomers are turning 65 at a rate of approximately 10,000 individuals per day (Cohn & Taylor, 2010). This change in demographics will undoubtedly impact the health care system. Current estimates indicate that adults 65 and older account for 43% of all hospital days and 38% of hospital discharges (Buie, Owings, DeFrances, & Golosinskiy, 2013). With higher rates of chronic disease, this age group affects virtually all segments of the health care system. In response to this trend, the Committee on the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation Initiative on the Future of Nursing at the Institute of Medicine (2010) concluded that nurses must develop competencies in the content area of gerontology. Based on my informal class survey, and with only 6,741 nurses holding a specialty in geriatric nursing, it does not appear that gerontological nursing is a growing area of interest for future nurses (American Association of Colleges of Nursing, 2010). However, the majority of patients to whom nurse graduates will be providing care are, in fact, older adults. Are they ready? How do we develop a new generation of nurses who will not only possess the knowledge base necessary to meet the complex care needs of older adults, but will also embrace the science of gerontological nursing?

Providing gerontological nursing education is a vital but challenging goal. Health care is constantly changing, and nursing, like other health professions, is faced with integrating new developments in health care. As the volume of information increases, schools of nursing must streamline content to ensure that the essentials required for a graduate nurse are met. Many schools have opted to drop or not offer a stand-alone gerontological nursing course. By choosing, instead, to infuse gerontological nursing into the general curriculum, these programs run the risk of losing the specialized knowledge required for caring for older adults. Furthermore, this shift to infusing gerontological content may give the inaccurate impression that caring...
for this population does not require a unique skillset. Content that is significant to the science of gerontology, such as altered presentation of illness, age-related changes in physiological and psychological function, access to care, alteration in societal roles, and risk factors for functional loss, are often overlooked when gerontology is integrated into the core nursing courses. These topics, which significantly affect the outcomes of older patients, are vital concepts in nursing education. A stand-alone gerontological nursing course not only provides the framework for adequately teaching gerontological concepts, but it also offers students the opportunity to explore and reflect on their attitudes toward the aging adult.

To provide clinical opportunities in caring for older adults, many schools of nursing use nursing homes as a first clinical experience. This introduction to the gerontological client has not resulted in increased interest in geriatric nursing (Swanlund & Kujath, 2012). Although nursing homes and skilled nursing facilities can provide some clinical experiences, it is important to remember that the majority of older adults live in the community and wish to remain there. Traditional long-term care and dementia units do not allow students to interact with well older adults or fully understand the challenges older adults experience when returning to the community setting after an acute event. A different type of clinical experience may provide a more accurate representation of this patient population.

Subacute, or short-stay, rehabilitation units within a nursing home or skilled nursing facility provide a contextual environment for understanding the medically complex problems of community-dwelling older adults following acute hospitalization. Beginning baccalaureate students are provided with a positive clinical experience, as they are enabled to increase competence in therapeutic communication while also performing important technical skills. Because the majority of patients on subacute units return to their previous community living arrangement, this setting enables students to learn the vital role that all nurses play in facilitating older adults’ return to the community.

Entry-level nurses who possess a strong basis in understanding common concerns of well older adults will be in a position to improve the care of older adults and avoid complications of illness. Delirium, which is associated with longer hospital stays and poorer outcomes, is often underrecognized by nurses (Rice et al., 2011). Functional decline among hospitalized patients is estimated to be 50% (Gill, Allore, Gahbauer, & Murphy, 2010). These outcomes suggest that the education of nurses in the care of older adults is crucial. With the current emphasis on readmission rates, nurses in all settings must be cognizant of health promotion strategies for older adults before, during, and after an acute event. Prevention of decline requires a knowledge of well older adults. Identifying symptoms that suggest a decline are central to preventing negative care outcomes among older adults, and a lack of knowledge regarding healthy aging can lead to irreversible changes in the health status of this population.

Because they do not recognize current aging and health trends, many nursing students may not realize that older adults will comprise the majority of the patient population to whom they will be providing care. Gerontological nursing content, coupled with appropriate clinical experiences, offer the best opportunity for students to understand the unique care needs of older adults. Providing gerontological nursing education to nursing students and fostering interest in caring for older adults is an opportunity to give nurses the knowledge necessary to lead the way in managing the health care of the aging population.

REFERENCES


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