Clinical Policy Evaluation Activity: Reinforcing Evidence-Based Practice

In health care organizations, numerous policies address topics such as personnel, the work environment, and nursing care of the patient. Nursing students must complete hospital site requirements that may include certification for basic life support, mastery of the hospital electronic health record, and familiarity with the regulations and policies. But, as novices, students view policies as being sacred and unquestionable, and assisting nursing students to apply evidence to analyze clinical policies is a challenge.

Background

Several years ago, nursing faculty from a small liberal arts college in the Pacific Northwest created a new concept-based curriculum. Using the American Association of Colleges of Nursing’s Essentials of Baccalaureate Education for Professional Nursing Practice (2008) report as a key pillar in the development of this new curriculum, faculty decided that all nine Essentials would be addressed in each of the four semesters of the students’ junior and senior years of the baccalaureate program. For example, Scholarship for Evidence-Based Practice (Essential III) and Health Care Policy, Finance, and Regulatory Environments (Essential IV) are introduced in the classroom during semesters one and two of the junior year. In semester three, beginning the senior year, students integrate those two Essentials by selecting and analyzing a hospital policy. In semester four, students look at policy from a national and global perspective.

The purpose of this article is to present a learning activity that was developed for third-semester students to analyze and evaluate hospital policies, using the current evidence-based practice literature. Nursing patient care policies should be based on scientifically sound research to help improve patient outcomes (Brown, 2014). The described activity provides prelicensure senior students with experience in evaluating policies to better inform them on how the scientific basis of evidence-based practice works in actual clinical settings.

Learning Objectives and Approach to the Policy Evaluation Activity

The learning activity described in this article has three objectives. The students are to (a) describe inpatient nursing policies, (b) explore the impact of the policies, and (c) discuss policy development and evaluation. The activity objectives correspond to the American Association of Colleges of Nursing’s (2008) recommendations.

This clinical policy activity actively engages students in learning and evaluating policy. As noted by the nursing education experts Benner, Sutphen, Leonard, and Day (2010), clinical learning is more effective when students apply theoretical models and integrate knowledge and practice. In this activity, third-semester students evaluate policies in dynamic hospital settings, integrating information from professional nurses and the current literature. The students actively apply theory to practice.

Students form work groups consisting of three or four students at the same clinical site. The groups choose a policy to review through several means. A group may decide on a policy based on interest or observation in the clinical setting. Some groups select a policy by scrolling through the hospital intranet, where all nursing care policies may be located. Other groups prefer to discuss policy topics with their clinical faculty, the nursing staff, or unit nurse managers.

This activity has a strong evidence-based component. After a policy is chosen and approved by the clinical faculty, students evaluate the policy by reviewing the evidence-based practice literature. Thus, nursing students gain practice in reviewing the literature and applying the findings to an active practice policy. The students are then challenged to support or refute the nursing policy based on their analysis of the evidence.

An active learning component of this clinical policy evaluation activity is assessing how the staff nurses receive the policy. Through interviews or the observation of staff, students identify barriers to implementation of the policy, such as staffing, cost, and level of importance of the policy to the staff nurses.

Another active learning component is the group oral presentation. Each student group gives a 20-minute PowerPoint® presentation of their policy assessment to the faculty and classmates. The student groups receive feedback on their work from faculty. The criteria for grading the activity include two areas: (a) effectiveness and thoroughness of their analysis of the literature, relevant to the policy and (b) professionalism in their delivery, appearance, and response to the questions posed by the audience.

Results From the Faculty’s Perspective

Faculty prefer this policy evaluation activity over a written paper assignment. This activity guides students in applying evidence to a clinical policy, engages them in discussions with clinical nurses, facilitates critical thinking, encourages them to work collaboratively in a group, and provides them with the opportunity to present their work in a professional manner. Although some students have reported their findings to the unit nursing staff, it has been recommended by the semester faculty to incorporate sharing the research information with the nursing unit as part of the assignment guidelines.

This activity has been administered for 2 years, and a variety of nursing policies have been reviewed and addressed. Students tend to select policies related to the specialty to which they are assigned. For example, students in the medical–surgical units chose policies such as medication reconciliation and sepsis, whereas students assigned to the maternity unit selected policies such as hyperbilirubinemia protocol for newborns or maternal water baths during labor.

Many advantages exist for having students formally present their work in class. Students hear about a variety of policies from different nursing specialties, while also learning how organizational culture, resources, and climate affect the imple-
mentation of a policy. In fact, some of the most interesting student presentations were those that occurred when staff did not comply with a policy or when a new policy was initiated without adequate evidence or planning.

Because students are assigned to various hospitals throughout the authors’ metropolitan area, another advantage of these presentations is that students and faculty learn about policies that are of most concern to hospitals. New policies based on evidence-based practice are also identified. For example, on the basis of recent research, one hospital developed a policy of not bathing newborns.

**Conclusion**

In the activity described in this article, students have learned to find and evaluate evidence supporting policies and that not all policies are up to date with current research. Using active learning principles, students evaluated a policy by reviewing evidence-based literature and identifying the challenges organizations have in implementing the policy. Other nursing schools can adopt this learning activity to help students integrate policy and evidence-based practice, using active learning techniques.

**References**


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