A Patient Panel of Case Studies to Teach Across the Family Nurse Practitioner Curriculum

Advanced practice nursing (APN) students need opportunities to develop the clinical reasoning and analytical skills necessary to navigate the increasingly complex and dynamic health care system. According to Benner, Tanner, and Chesla (2009), “clinical reasoning refers to the iterative process of noticing, interpreting, and responding with an emphasis on understanding the patient as a person” (p. 230). Case-based learning exercises allow faculty to introduce realistic patient practice scenarios, while teaching students the analytical skills needed to successfully evaluate and treat patients (Hooper, 2014).

Strategy

For our newly launched graduate online family nurse practitioner program (summer 2016), we developed an evolving patient panel of case studies. Our objective was to foster the continued development of clinical reasoning abilities needed to address the complex challenges involved in the delivery of evidence-based, holistic health care. We developed 28 case studies using patients of differing ages; ethnicities; social, family, and economic backgrounds; and medical problems ranging in complexity from simple and acute to complex, chronic conditions.

Implementation

These unfolding case studies were introduced during the first semester of the program in health assessment and continued in the adult clinical (theory) course. All courses in our program are online, with both weekly asynchronous preparatory work and synchronous live class sessions using Adobe Connect™ website conferencing software.

During the health assessment live sessions, faculty facilitated small groups consisting of three to four students worked through the process of formulating the chief complaint, history of present illness, and the review of systems for a particular case study, thus beginning the process of calculative reasoning or analysis of a situation (Benner et al., 2009).

Students then worked in different faculty facilitated small groups on the remaining portions of the same case study (family and social history, differential diagnoses, and patient plan) during our adult clinical (theory) course live sessions. In addition to medications, diagnostic and imaging tests, and treatment, the essential elements of the patient plan also emphasized health promotion, social determinants of health, and national screening guidelines.

For the adult health course, a comprehensive template using the SOAP (Subjective, Objective, Assessment, and Plan) mnemonic was created in Google™ Docs and is available from the authors on request, as is an exemplar case study. The Family Education Rights and Privacy Act complains that Google Doc serves as a Wiki page® and allows online small student groups to simultaneously complete case studies during live sessions. As a summative assessment of the process, all students individually submitted two additional patient panel case studies.

Student Results and Reactions

Faculty evaluated the clinical reasoning process through rubrics and weekly formative assessments. In addition to demonstrating the ability to collect patient data and formulate a plan of care, students verbalized having a better understanding of the multiple aspects of a patient that shape decision-making and lifestyle choices (Benner et al., 2009). Students noticed that patient needs often went deeper than prescribing medications or ordering diagnostic tests. Through these case studies, students articulated having a better understanding of the scope of their role as advanced practice nurses. Building on the success of this teaching strategy, faculty continue to develop learning activities using this patient panel in other courses, adding to the patients’ history and complexity, with the patients presenting to clinic with new issues.

References


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