Clinical education

**Courage to care for our United States veterans: A constructivist way of teaching and learning for future nurses**

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**ABSTRACT**

The knowledge and skills in providing veteran centered care is essential. The purpose of this retrospective evaluation is to examine a faculty's reflections on a BSN psychiatric mental health curriculum initiative that provides knowledge and skills regarding veteran care through several avenues to senior nursing students. This qualitative study uses self-reflections through a constructivist view of teaching and learning as the framework. Open discussions in didactic about the unique psychological health issues of veterans formed a foundational knowledge for the students. The seminar time was used to discuss real veteran case situations. Simulation provided opportunities to address veteran resources. Problem based projects use available evidence to solve veteran health issues. The educators show their commitment to the compassionate and caring ideals of our profession by fostering an educational environment where future nurses can truly learn about veteran centered care.

**1. Introduction**

Most often the general public hears that we as a nation have an obligation and responsibility to provide culturally competent care for those who have served the United States. Healthcare providers who have had the opportunity to care for veterans know that it is more than an obligation, it is a privilege and a unique experience. The knowledge and compassion in rendering care develops from the pride one feels in serving our nation's heroes (Hart, 2015). According to Biggins et al. (2013), the Veterans Health Administration Office of Nursing Services advises on issues of workforce, leadership, academics, research and evidence based clinical practice for the workforce of nurses nationwide in Veteran Administration medical systems and healthcare. The Joining Forces initiative supports increased awareness of the unique health needs of our nation's veterans, service members, and their families by educating healthcare providers and students across the country (AACN, 2015). Certain nursing schools in the United States enhanced their curriculum to include veteran health care issues, veteran wellness, and supportive military based health care culture (Morrison-Beedy et al., 2015). Students acquiring knowledge and skills in the care of veterans ultimately impacts nursing by helping students cultivate a deeper appreciation for their role (Keavney, 2015; Jones and Breen, 2015).

**2. Purpose**

The purpose of this retrospective analysis is to provide the author's reflections on a BSN psychiatric mental health curriculum initiative that assimilates veteran care through several avenues in a senior level nursing course. As the spouse of a veteran, the author's intent behind the structure of the course was to provide awareness for future nurses about caring for veterans. The courage to take on such an endeavor stemmed from the sincere desire as an educator to share her reflections and observations from a nursing career working with the military and veteran population. It was these reflections embedded in the andragogy of the course which opened up learning opportunities for the instructor and her students in both the classroom and in clinical practice. The paradigms shift from the instructor to the learner is inevitable.

Veteran centered care in the United States is about understanding complex issues and comorbidities. Caregivers cannot only address one illness but must take a holistic approach to addressing the physical, psychological, spiritual and economic aspect of veteran care. Older veterans may be in need of healthcare services in the home due to long term disabilities compounded with issues such as depression or anxiety (US Department of Veterans Affairs, 2013). The younger veterans may need healthcare services in the home as a result of combat related impairments such as traumatic brain injury or spinal cord injuries (Allen et al., 2013). The challenge for today's healthcare providers is to deliver high quality care that addresses the complex needs of veterans, especially in the older adult population (Cline, 2015). Having an awareness of services that are available to veterans can give caregivers a better outlook on how to provide enhanced veteran centered care. Enhanced veteran care is applying the evidence based practice when...
caring for this vulnerable population.

3. Methods

A qualitative heuristic approach was utilized in the form of self-discovery and introspection. Self-reflection was the avenue for gathering data; the literature supports this shift in pedagogy towards a learner-centered education (Wulsun, 2013). The purpose of reflection was to develop self-awareness, enhance thinking and possibly enact a change in practice (Kennison, 2012). The senior students enrolled in the author’s psychiatric mental health nursing course are from very diverse backgrounds with a small portion of the students having an affiliation with the military community. The course has the following methods of rendering teaching and learning: didactic, seminar, simulation and clinical.

Military and veteran’s health is primarily discussed midpoint in the course after the basic foundational concepts of mental health have been covered. The above methods of teaching and learning are used to incorporate military and veterans’ healthcare. A small clinical group of students that are assigned at the VA hospital have an opportunity to immerse themselves in this environment. The other clinical groups may have experiences working in their assigned clinical settings with veterans and their families. Students participate in an unfolding case with inclusion of military families in simulation midway through the course. Students engage in a problem based learning project supported by evidence to address issues affecting veterans care after completing an intentional needs assessment. Guest speakers with military and veteran affiliations were invited to provide a real perspective to the students about resources and experiences. Evidence based readings that involve veterans centered care are assigned in the course.

The use of teaching strategies that promote culturally sensitive nursing education is crucial to match the rapidly changing health care environment (Dewald, 2012; Dudas, 2012). Knowledge and skills in understanding veterans care can be part of a well-developed culturally sensitive nursing curriculum. A holistic approach as it applies to US veterans allows a traditional problem based disease care to a more sensitive nursing curriculum. A holistic approach as it applies to US understanding veterans care can be part of a well-developed culturally competent care. An e

1. Military Culture:
❖ Students are surprised to learn about the culture unique to the military that affects care. Students were perplexed that different branches of service have their own unique culture.
❖ Students are baffled that alcohol and abuse seems to be prevalent in the military culture.
❖ Students were confused that sense of pride gets in the way of getting help.
❖ Students did not understand the brotherhood that exists within and between services

2. Veteran’s Care
❖ Students perceived that there should be no difference in the care provided to all patients. Students thought that all patient centered care are equal without any regard for the strengths and uniqueness of the veteran population.
❖ Students do not understand the devastating physical and psychological health issues that affect the veterans after experiencing war(s).
❖ Students perceived that some veterans have been exposed to very difficult healthcare situations in their lifetime but does not know how to address them.
❖ Students felt that if veterans are adhering to their care, then their case management can be effective.

3. Supports and Resources
❖ Students were not aware of resources unique to the military and veterans.
❖ Students were not aware of the family implications in caring for the complex healthcare issues of veterans.
❖ Students question the lack of family support during care.
❖ Students were in awe for all the homeless veterans in the state.

The above realizations provided the author a navigation on how to better inform students that caring for veterans is a courageous act. According to Hawkins and Morse (2014), courage is a patient centered characteristic manifested as a nurse trait. When a nurse can perceive what a patient needs and be self aware of the element of fear of not knowing and takes risk in one's action, a patient centered care is rendered. Student nurses require an understanding of the unique experiences and specific health needs of veterans to deliver evidence based and comprehensive care (Cooper et al., 2016).

The author supports that culturally competent based curriculum offers an understanding of the basic premise of military culture as a foundation for veterans care. Understanding the availability and accessibility of veteran services is an equally important part of managing care for veterans. Students who can engage veterans in their care empower veterans to drive their own health care needs. More exposure to veteran care coupled with opportunities to gain knowledge and skills will prime future graduates to care for this special population of patients. The use of open discussions in didactic sessions to support learning care of veterans provided a good foundation of understanding by giving students a more detailed knowledge of the unique psychological health issues that veterans face. The author asked probing questions such as “What are your thoughts of caring for a homeless veteran?”; “How do show a veteran that you understand their complex health issues?” and “How can you show your empathy to a veteran?” These questions were asked during open discussions to evoke insightful reflections. The seminar time was used to discuss real veteran case situations. If students can understand the perspectives of trauma informed care from these clinical situations encountered, it will allow for self reflections of recovery oriented and empowering strategies for veteran centered care (Kelly et al., 2014). Students realized that cultural humility requires self-evaluation and the awareness that one's own culture is not the only (or best) one. This epiphany is key to understanding what is important in providing care. According to Schuessler...
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