All In A Day’s Work: Comparative Case Studies In The Management Of Nursing Care In A Rural Community

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Introduction

This paper is extracted from an on-going study of the relationship between a rural population's needs for nursing care and the response to that care from a District Nursing Service and nurses employed in primary care sector doctors’ surgeries. Data analysis is in progress. The paper outlines the purpose, objectives and design of the study.

The Study

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to explore the role and functions of District Nurses (DN) and nurses employed in the primary sector doctor's surgery settings (GPN). In particular the study will explore the nursing behaviours associated with direct care-giving activities and their relationship to the clients' expressed demands for nursing care in the home and the doctor's surgery in a rural community. The study addresses the issue of the rural population's access to good quality nursing services and the impact these services have on the client's well-being. Furthermore, the study explores the covert and overt structures shaping nursing practice in the community.

This study of nurses employed in the primary sector medical surgeries (GPNs) and District Nurses (DNs) working in one District Nursing Service in a rural area in Victoria was designed as two interrelated studies. The study was carried out by a team of researchers consisting of J Hall and J Mahnken under the direction of Professor Dirk M Keyzer, Faculty of Health and Behavioural Sciences, Deakin University, Warrnambool, Victoria. A fourth member, K Keyzer, joined the team later in the study to assist in the analysis of the qualitative data. The study commenced on 1 February 1994, and was completed by 28 February 1995. The study was funded from monies made available by Deakin University to establish the Chair in Community Health Nursing on the Warrnambool campus.

This research is an extension of a prior study funded by the Department of Health and Community Services, Victoria (DH & CS) of the costs of district nursing services in urban, rural and remote areas of Victoria (Keyzer 1993).
The major findings in the original study suggested that the population's demands for and utilisation of DN resources could not be linked to medical diagnosis, or specific diagnosis-related groupings based on a medical diagnosis, nor could the clients' demands be directly attributed to their gender, or age. The findings of the study indicated that the consumption of DN resources was directly attributed to the complex interplay of the clients' responses to the psycho-social and physical factors shaping their abilities to engage in everyday living. Thus, the study suggested that demands for so-called "basic" nursing care were more complex than has traditionally been recognised and these demands accounted for the major portion of DN time per episode of care.

The present study seeks to clarify this demand for care expressed by the client population and the nurses' response to these claims for nursing care. The present study also extends the previous one by exploring the work of GPNs. The combined study of GPNs and DNs, therefore, explores the work of nurses in the provision of community-based health services to describe the nursing behaviours and the meanings behind these behaviours.

The review of the literature on nursing services indicated that little or no research had been carried out in nursing practice in rural areas of Victoria. Furthermore, there appeared to be a lack of clarity in the usage of the term “District Nurse”, which is often used synonymously with the terms “home-based/community health nursing” (Kendig et al. 1992; Lampshire and Rolfe, 1994). The literature available was mainly of a broad brush history written from the profession's perspective and is largely self-congratulatory in nature. This is exemplified by the history of the District Nursing Services in South Australia recorded in "Angels of Mercy" (Linn, 1994). The literature, therefore, did not directly address district nursing as a distinct area of practice, but focussed on management and financial issues generated by changes in health policy. Similarly, the existing literature originated mainly in the United Kingdom and to a lesser extent the United States of America. A vast area of nursing practice in Australia appears to be unrecognised and under-represented in nursing research. Thus, the present study is exploratory in nature and serves as a baseline for future studies of community-based nursing services in rural areas of Australia.

Objectives of the Study

The principal objectives of the study are:

- to explore the population's demands for community-based nursing services in the primary care sector medical surgeries and the home;
- to observe nursing behaviours in response to these expressed demands for nursing care;
- to identify and link factors which describe nursing practice in these contexts;
- to identify the factors shaping the delivery of nursing care; and
- to identify thematic concerns on which future studies of nursing practice may be based.
In this way, this exploratory study provides insights into the demand and supply of nursing care in the primary care medical surgeries and District Nursing Services in a rural area of Victoria. In particular, the study extends a previous study in District Nursing Services (Keyzer, 1993), in which complex demands for nursing services were uncovered. The data presented in that prior study, however, suggested a uniformity of demand that may have reflected the nurses' perceptions of the client's demands for care, rather than the actual demand for care. The present study, therefore, addresses such issues in its exploration of the nurse-client interaction during the care-giving processes in both settings.

The study, therefore, aims to describe in greater detail the complexity inherent in "basic" nursing care from both the nurses' and the patients' perspectives. The convenience sample is small and in direct relationship to the demography of the rural area; the study therefore provides a research base upon which further studies may be built and comparisons between services may be made. In particular, the study aims to explore the way in which diverse variables, such as socio-economic status, demography and funding, influence the population's access to and utilisation of a nursing service. In view of the size and diversity of the Australian geography and distribution of the population, it would be impossible to select one population as a true representative of the whole.

**The Design of the Study**

The study was designed as two integrated studies. One study focussed on the work of nurses employed in the primary care sector medical surgeries (GPNs) and the other concerned itself with the work of District Nurses (DNs) in one hospital-based District Nursing Service. All of the nurses and their clients lived and worked in the same geographical area of Victoria. They were part of the same community and, therefore, may be viewed as sharing some common experiences in their social lives. This does not imply that a rural community is a homogeneous group of people and that differences between sub-groups was not expected or found.

The possibility that many of the nurses and their clients were related by blood, marriage, or had been known to each other for long periods of time outside the formal health service context, were factors that had to be taken into account in designing this study. Thus, the ethical considerations included not only gaining informed consent from the participants to involve them in this study, but also the assurance that the identity of the persons, services and location would remain known only to the researchers. Permission to conduct each component of the study was obtained from Deakin University's Ethics Committee, the hospital's Ethics Committee and from the participants' employers. Each participant, carer and patient, was provided with a verbal explanation of the study; a plain English statement of the study's purpose and the participants' rights; and a signed consent form was obtained; and all data are stored in a locked cupboard in the School of Nursing to which only the research team have access.

The names of the participants and their location are known only to the two researchers involved in the data collection. Pseudonyms were allocated to the participants by the secretary transcribing the tapes and are the only labels by which the participants were
known to the other members of the team. Thus, the identities of the respondents remained unknown to half of the research team in the analysis of the data. Anonymity was also assured by reporting the data in terms of "male doctors" and "female nurses". This ensured that the minority of female doctors and male nurses cannot be recognised and differentiated from the majority of male doctors and female nurses.

The use of the computer program "Nudist" to analyse the data also obscured the identities of the participants and their places of employment. This computer package also assisted in the removal of bias from the interpretation of the data.

The utilisation of the "Omaha" Problem Classification Scheme (Martin and Scheet, 1992) to collect data pertaining to the population's expressed demands for home-based nursing services, the presentation of aggregates of that data, further maintains the anonymity of the participants.

Each component of the study was conducted as if it were an independent study. Whilst the team discussed the methodology, methods and analysis of data, the empirical part was conducted separately. Thus, control was exerted through the use of one interviewer/observer for each study, the limitation of the participants to nurse practitioners who were Registered Nurses in each service and to the delivery of nursing care in the medical surgery and the home. The other two team members were used to validate the analysis of data and to guard against bias. Thus, triangulation of methods, researchers and data was used to ensure rigour and control in this qualitative study.

Summary

The study, therefore, is composed of two parallel studies conducted by different researchers studying two different subsets of a population and the nursing profession, over the same period of time, in the same geographic location. The researchers were registered nurses with comparable experiences and academic backgrounds. Every opportunity was taken within the boundaries of the interpretive approach to qualitative research to ensure the reliability and validity of data collected.

References


