

The Certificate in Gerontological Nursing for rural and regional nurses

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Abstract

Aims: To provide a hospital run, university accredited course designed to enhance knowledge base and advanced critical thinking skills of registered nurses working with older people in any health setting at a practical level.

Methods: The course is run over 22 weeks with a combination of face to face and online learning and also clinical placement. With a strong emphasis on current evidence based practice, lectures are provided by a team of multidisciplinary experts in their field, peak body and industry representatives. Assessment tasks are aligned with current University expectations including academic requirements, and learning outcomes.

Relevance: In Victoria, more than 46% of multi-day patient stays are for patients over the age of 70 years (1). Statistics released by the Department of Health in 2011 indicate that the Loddon Mallee region which occupies more than a quarter of the area of the state, has a higher than average percentage of persons with need for assistance with core activities, and the highest percentage (among the geographical regions of Victoria) of people aged 75 or more living alone. Statistics of Australian hospitals show both the age and acuity of inpatients is increasing. Therefore the need to have a good understanding of the current issues and evidence based practice related to nursing older people is vital. Concurrently, the need for nurses specifically trained in nursing older people is growing; however there is a deficit of courses available to nurses with a focus on aged care and nursing older people in Victoria. Locally, there are currently no tertiary post graduate aged care specific courses available.

Results: In the Loddon Mallee region there is increasing interest from local health services and individual registered nurses in undertaking the Certificate in Gerontological Nursing, with expressions of interest and subsequent student cohorts trending upward every year for the last 5 years. Student cohorts are made up of nurses working in a variety of regional and rural settings. Our data indicates an increasing interest of applicants to pursue further university study following completing this course, with more than half of the current cohort of students indicating this intention.

Conclusions: This course is going some way toward fulfilling a dire need for aged care specific training within the nursing workforce in rural and regional Victoria. Evaluation data indicates students find the course invaluable to their clinical practice.

Introduction

A hot topic in the news recently has been the current and looming aged care crisis. This 'crisis' will impact both aged care and acute sectors of the health industry and includes elements such as a rapidly ageing population, older people making up the majority of acute admissions to hospitals alongside workforce training and recruitment issues in the aged care sector (2-4). Overall this 'crisis' is touted as 'unprecedented' (5).

Recently the federal government acknowledged that "an appropriately skilled and well qualified workforce is fundamental to the delivery of quality aged care" (6) however the health sector continues to have difficulties attracting and retaining skilled workers with the turnover of staff in aged care in particular higher than any other health sector (6). There is also a relative reluctance of nurses to undertake specialised training in this area (4). Concurrently, consumer groups are demanding nursing staff that care for older people are of high quality and have the skills and knowledge to provide quality care (7, 8).

In Victoria, tertiary or post graduate level nursing courses specialising in care of the older person are uncommon. While there are short courses available that have a management focus, there are few that address the needs of the older person across the care continuum (1). It is important that nurses are able to undertake specific education in relation to nursing older people so that they are able to make the essential connections to enable care informed by best practice (8). The Certificate in Gerontological Nursing at Bendigo Health began in its earliest format in 1994. It was designed to develop the learning, critical thinking and problem solving skills required of the advanced gerontological nurse. Over time, the course has progressed to include content that specifically addresses current evidence based issues in nursing the older person including person-centred care and progressive recommendations from peak bodies (1). This paper will describe the rationale for the course, course content, delivery and evaluation feedback.

The 'aged care crisis'

It seems news reports regarding the 'aged care crisis' appear in the headlines daily. Certainly the focus has been on residential aged care (5-7). However the impact that the ageing population is likely to have on the health care industry is broader than residential aged care. To illustrate the current and predicted impact of Australia's ageing society, some startling statistics:

- The number of people aged 65 years and older is expected to increase from three million (currently 14% of our population) to eight million by 2050 (5) with Australians having one of the highest life expectancies in the world (9).
- In March, reports highlighted that the number of people accessing aged care services in Australia is expected to increase by 250% over the next 40 years (2).
- In 2009, almost half (49%) of Australians aged 65-74 had five or more chronic conditions. This rate increased to 70% of those aged 85 or over (9). Co-morbidities require complex care (9).
- 34-50% of older patients (aged 65 years or over) experience functional decline in hospitals (1). At three months following discharge from hospital only 50% of patients recover from functional decline (1).
- In 2013 it is estimated that 322,000 Australians live with Dementia (10). The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare released figures in 2012 estimating that the number of Australians with dementia will triple (to 900,000) by 2050 (11). These predictions for dementia in Australia have been called Australia's dementia epidemic (6). New reports show however that care for those with dementia in Australian hospitals is inadequate (10).
- Locally, patients aged over 65 made up 42.95% of total admissions at Bendigo Health in 2012 (12).

Associate Professor Debra Sheets cited in 2012 that "The exponential growth in the geriatric population continues to present challenges to the nursing workforce due to a dearth of nurses prepared to care for elderly people as well as the ongoing shortage of nurses generally" (4). While the context is Canadian, the statement also applies to the Australian nursing workforce. It is estimated that only a very small percentage of the overall nursing workforce have specialist training in caring for older people, despite the fact that older people make up the majority of patients in their care (4, 13).

The Certificate in Gerontological Nursing

Tolson and colleagues in their book "Evidence Informed Nursing with Older People" (p 4-5) states that the scope of nursing older people needs to include:

- health promoting aspects that enable people to optimise health, well-being and independence in later life;

- curative and rehabilitative dimensions that focus on functional or psychological recovery from illness or injury;
- facilitating self-care and enabling effective management of long-term conditions;
- providing care for those who become frail or with limited and/or declining self-care capacity;
- palliative and end-of-life care (8).

As such, education for nurses regarding nursing older people must encompass skills and knowledge that is broader than the residential aged care and end of life nursing sphere (8). Furthermore, postgraduate courses should be robust and include detailed content in order to prepare nurses for this role. The Certificate in Gerontological Nursing course is designed to enhance knowledge base and advanced critical thinking skills of registered nurses working with older people in any health setting at a practical level. With a strong emphasis on current evidence based practice, lectures are provided by experts in their field, peak body and industry representatives. Assessment tasks are aligned with current University expectations including academic requirements, and learning outcomes of the course meet the Australian Qualifications Framework standards at level 8 (post graduate certificate) and level 9 (post graduate diploma) (14).

Structure of the course

The course consists of three units and 24 hours of specialised aged care experience. The course runs over two semesters totalling 22 weeks.

Unit 1: Introduction to Advanced Gerontological nursing and the Aged Care System

This unit introduces and develops the concepts of adult learning, clinical critical thinking and problem solving skills required of the advanced gerontological nurse. The theories and the actual process of ageing are explored focusing on the physiological, pathological and the psychosocial aspects. Government policies and funding frameworks are critically analysed.

Unit 2: Care of the Confused Older Person

This unit explores factors that contribute to confusion in older people and examines subsequent management strategies in all care settings. Students will develop skills in planning, delivery and evaluation of high quality care for confused older people. Assessment tools and management strategies are explored. Policies and legal aspects relevant to the care of the confused older person are examined.

This unit utilises the workplace experience of students and includes workplace assessment tasks including a reflective practice journal based on an episode of care with a client/patient and an essay using case study methodology based on an episode of care with a patient/client.

Unit 3: Advanced Gerontology for Wellness

This unit enhances the clinical management of older adults with health care needs using an interdisciplinary team approach to promote a wellness focus in the provision of community based health care. Assessment strategies and relevant tools for effective management are explored. Laws and policies relevant to consent, freedom of information, capacity and advanced care planning are explored.

Specialised aged care clinical experience

Students undertake 2 days clinical experience and 1 day attendance at conference/seminar. The aim of the clinical placement is to give students the opportunity to act in a supernumerary role so that by observation and subsequent reflection they may integrate the gerontological theory of the course into their nursing practice. This experience is not to teach new tasks, but rather to give students the opportunity to see their practice from a different perspective by applying new knowledge to 'old' or familiar situations. Students are encouraged to undertake placement in an area that differs from their

normal workplace. This strategy allows students to synthesise advanced aged care theory to various areas of gerontological practice. Reflection on practice is one way to encourage nurses to humanise the care they give (15).

Reasons for undertaking the course

As part of the application process, applicants are asked to briefly outline their reasons why they wanted to undertake the Certificate in Gerontological Nursing.

A common theme throughout responses is the recognition that older people make up the majority of admissions in most areas of health care “Although I work in the acute setting, the majority of the patients that I care for are elderly. I nurse now more elderly people than I ever have before”. At the same time some students cite being underprepared to adequately care for this cohort of patients “Understanding the older person, their families, dealing with confused older people and their co morbidities requires knowledge and practice... caring for the elderly is a very complex challenge”.

Other students acknowledge that while they have some knowledge, it is important to keep up to date with current evidence based practice. “To ensure that the patients/residents receive appropriate and quality care, it is the responsibility [of nurses] to maintain and improve knowledge and skills relevant to the position...I am responsible for ensuring that the care for each resident is systematically planned, implemented and evaluated and that approaches to resident care support independence and are consistent with current best practice.”

Some students undertake the course as a result of a new or well established passion for nursing older people. “I have developed a keen interest in working with older people and I have found this to be an area where I would like to gain more knowledge and experience... I found working with older people and being part of their journey very rewarding”.

The student cohorts

The prerequisites for the course are that applicants are RNs with current AHPRA registration and are working in a setting where they work with older people. This may include acute, sub acute, residential aged care or community settings.

Analysis of the student cohorts reveal that the workplace, experience and prior qualifications of nurses who have undertaken this course varied greatly. While in the past, the majority of student cohorts were made up of those working in the aged care sector. More recently, the more than half of the student cohorts from 2012 and 2013 are made up of nurses working in the acute sector. Those who are currently in management positions make up a smaller number of overall students, with most working in clinical non-management positions. The length of time that applicants have been working as an RN prior to undertaking the course also varied greatly with the range being from 1 year to more than 25 years. For the last two years, those participants who have graduated in the three years prior to undertaking the course outnumbered those who had been nursing for longer periods of time.

While the course is open to all RNs that meet the pre requisite criteria, most students come from the Loddon Mallee region. The majority of students are from the local area of Bendigo with a small number travelling from as far as 250km away.

A multidisciplinary team

With a strong emphasis on current evidence based practice, lectures are provided by local and metropolitan experts in their field, peak body and industry representatives. This includes consumer representatives, doctors, nurses, nurse practitioners and consultants. To illustrate, the following list includes a small snapshot of some of the topics and those who present into the topic within this course:

- Care of the confused older person—Cognition Consultant, Bendigo Health

- Management of Parkinson's' in Community, Hospital, Aged and Palliative care settings—Parkinson's Nurse Consultant, Parkinson's Victoria Inc.
- Accreditation/standards in aged care—Quality consultant, Bendigo Health
- Nutrition and Ageing—physiological, sociological and cultural aspects—Consultant dietician
- Veterans and aged care best practice—Department of Veterans affairs
- Legal considerations—Lawyer, Bendigo Health
- Wound management in the older person—Nurse practitioner—Wound care
- Respiratory assessment and management—Nurse practitioner—Respiratory
- Health privacy—Health Services Commissioner
- A stroke survivor perspective of the stroke experience and stroke recovery—Central Victorian Stroke Support Group Inc.

Feedback from students regarding guest speakers is consistently very positive with some students stating they were “moved beyond words” by the accounts of some consumer representatives. Research supports the use of experts and consumers as experts in nurse education (16, 17). Academic service partnerships (including consumer groups) increase the likelihood of improved patient-centred practice and particularly psychosocial care for patients and their families (1, 16). Recent evidence also indicates patient safety and quality of care can be improved by encouraging academic and service partnerships for nursing education (18).

Assessment tasks

Our data shows an increasing interest of applicants to pursue further university study following completing the Certificate in Gerontological Nursing, with more than half of students indicating this intention. Equally, many students have not undertaken study at a tertiary level before, therefore the Certificate in Gerontological Nursing contents and standards meet University standards in order to realistically prepare students for this academic path. This course has successfully undergone accreditation by an Australian university for the second time in 2012.

Assessment tasks include a combination of formative and summative activities (19) including an exam, essays, a debate, reflective journal, a small research project, oral presentations and the completion of a clinical appraisal tool. The combination of these assessment tasks allows students to develop a range of academic and public speaking skills and also ensures that by using multiple modes of assessment students are able to demonstrate learning in a number of ways (20).

In reflection

Students evaluate each session each week. This data is collated and fed back to presenters to help revise and refine content. After the course is finished, students are invited to give feedback on the course overall. The following comments encapsulate feedback overall.

“I found that the course provided me with a significantly improved ability to listen to concerns from fellow staff members by valuing their individual perceptions of health issues. I also found this self empowering and felt enabled to participate more effectively in discussions in my work environment. I also gained confidence through being better informed and have won favour from workmates because of the increased knowledge gained in the program which addresses real issues at work”.

“The Gerontology course has given greater insight on the elderly—their physiology, their needs, their special care considerations when they are unwell. In terms of my work with patients with

dementia, I have shifted from viewing their behaviour as simply annoying and undesirable to seeing it as a symptom of a condition thereby being able to manage it and deal with it better. In terms of my career, I feel that the Gerontology course has opened up new possibilities for me”.

“I was a nurse working in aged care for almost 20 years when I decided to undertake the RN conversion course [and then complete] my Graduate year. As a mature aged and newly graduated RN I undertook the Certificate in Gerontological Nursing Course in the year following my Graduate year to assist in consolidating all I had learned so far. We had many thought provoking speakers who at times challenged our thinking. I enjoyed having the specialist speakers who were able to expand on their area of expertise and handed on many of the ‘tricks of the trade’ they had acquired over their many years of experience. The course allowed insight into the many and varied areas that is nursing and what services / resources are available to assist the older person and those who are caring for them. Nursing is an ever changing profession and courses like this assist staff to remain up-to-date and to be aware of what is happening in other areas of nursing”.

This feedback highlights that the Certificate in Gerontological Nursing course is succeeding in preparing nurses for the role of nursing older people. Word of mouth feedback also indicates that overall the course has a very good reputation and that is reflected in the increasing numbers of expressions of interest received each year.

Conclusion

In a climate where there is increasing pressure on health professionals to remain up to date with best practice and evidence based care; the Certificate in Gerontological Nursing course offered at Bendigo Health fulfils this need. By providing a post graduate hospital certificate course specifically addressing the nursing needs of the older person that meets university standards, nurses undertaking the course can be assured of a thorough learning experience to help them in their nursing career.

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