

Supporting the evolution of a research culture among nurses in Malaysia

AUTHORS

Dr Melanie Birks

RN, PhD, MEd, BN, DipAppSci(Nsg)
Senior Lecturer, School of Nursing and Midwifery,
Monash University, Gippsland Campus, Victoria,
Australia.
Melanie.birks@med.monash.edu.au

Professor Karen Francis

RN, PhD, MEd, MHIth SC PHC, Grad Cert Uni Teach/
Learn, BHIth Sc Nsg, Dip HIth SC Nsg, MRCNA
Professor of Rural Nursing, School of Nursing and
Midwifery, Monash University, Gippsland Campus,
Victoria, Australia.

Associate Professor Ysanne Chapman

RN, PhD, MSc (Hons), BEd (Nsg) GDE, DNE, DRM,
MRCNA
Associate Professor of Nursing, School of Nursing and
Midwifery, Monash University, Gippsland Campus,
Victoria, Australia.

Dr Jane Mills

RN, PhD, MN, MEd, BN, Grad Cert (Tert Teach), FRCNA
Senior Lecturer, School of Nursing, Midwifery and
Nutrition, James Cook University, Cairns Campus,
Queensland, Australia.

Ms Jo Porter

RN, MN, Grad Cert Higher Ed, Grad Dip Crit Care
Lecturer, School of Nursing and Midwifery, Monash
University, Gippsland Campus, Victoria, Australia.

KEY WORDS

evidence based practice, Malaysia, professional
development, research training

ABSTRACT

Objective

This paper describes a project to promote a research culture amongst nurses in Malaysia. The project, funded by the Australian Government's Australia Malaysia Institute, and implemented by a group of Australian nurse academics, provided a rare professional development opportunity to nurses in urban and remote areas of Malaysia.

Setting

The Malaysian capital of Kuala Lumpur and the remote town of Sibu, on the Island of Borneo, were the setting for this project. The diversity of Malaysia was epitomized in the locations chosen for the implementation of tailored professional development seminars.

Conclusions

Evidence based practice in nursing is a global phenomenon. The importance of basing nursing care on scientifically derived, current evidence is a critical element of contemporary nursing practice. This notion is appreciated and accepted by nurses in Malaysia who, despite being impacted upon by barriers to the conduct and implementation of research in the clinical area, seek opportunities to enhance patient outcomes through evidence based practice. Projects such as the one described in this paper provide a means for nurses to undertake professional development through collaborative activities that are not limited by geographic, socioeconomic or cultural boundaries.

INTRODUCTION

The growth of the evidence based practice movement has impacted on nursing throughout the world. In countries where baccalaureate preparation for initial licensure has yet to become the minimum standard, the challenge to support practice with evidence is intensified. Malaysia is a nation in which nursing is regulated, yet professionally the discipline is in its infancy. There is an acceptance however, that nursing practice should be consistent with standards being advocated in nearby developed nations. In response to feedback provided by graduates of the authors' employing university, funding was sought and obtained to implement professional development workshops for nurses in Malaysia. This paper outlines the aims of the project and the means by which these were achieved.

BACKGROUND

Malaysia is an intriguing country spread across two landmasses. The diversity of ecology and culture in this country presents unique challenges to health care professions. Variations in socioeconomic status, coupled with the sultry climate, result in a range of health conditions that nurses need to manage, from lifestyle diseases to tropical ailments. Across both Peninsula Malaysia, which is home to the nation's capital of Kuala Lumpur, and the Eastern states of Sarawak and Sabah on the Island of Borneo, nurses provide care in a variety of urban, rural and remote settings.

Nursing in Malaysia has developed along similar lines to other countries that were formerly British colonies. Most nurses in Malaysia gain qualifications in colleges attached to hospitals where, since 1990, registration is achieved with the awarding of a Diploma of Nursing (Shamsudin 2006). Selected universities offer baccalaureate degree programs across the country, however the cost and educational prerequisite requirements for these courses dictate that most nurses enter the profession at diploma level. While diploma preparation includes an introduction to the basic concepts of research, nurses in Malaysia, as

in many other parts of the world, face barriers in the workplace in the application and conduct of research in the clinical environment (McKenna et al 2004). These barriers include poor access to computer facilities, isolation from expert support, inadequate research and critical appraisal skills, lack of time, lack of authority to implement change, difficulty in seeing the relevance of research to practice and most importantly, a lack of confidence in many nurses' abilities to locate and assess evidence for practice (Leach 2006; Olade 2004; Nagy et al 2001)

The purpose of the project described in this paper was to assist nurses in Malaysia to work towards overcoming identified barriers to implementing evidence based practice through the provision of a rare professional development opportunity. The primary goal was to conduct seminar presentations and workshops to develop and enhance skills in the conduct, critique, application and dissemination of nursing research. Recent criticism over the quality of nursing care in Malaysia (Samy 2006) supported the need for this type of activity. As experienced academics the project team recognised the importance of evidence based practice to the status of the profession and, most significantly, to improved patient outcomes. An ultimate aim of this project was to promote a research culture amongst the profession in Malaysia. This goal was consistent with that espoused by the Nursing Board Malaysia. Nurses who attended the workshops were given a certificate of attendance that could be used as evidence for accruing Continuing Professional Development (CPD) points necessary for annual renewal of practice licences.

The role of all nurses in advancing evidence based nursing practice (Burns and Grove 2008; Newell and Burnard 2006) was strongly emphasised throughout the project. Strategies to overcome obstacles to evidence-based practice and the establishment of support networks were amongst the means used to instil an appreciation of the value of developing a research culture.

THE PROJECT

The authors have a long association with nursing in Malaysia, having been involved in the development and delivery of post registration baccalaureate and master of nursing programs since 1999. The extensive alumni are located throughout Peninsula and East Malaysia and many occupy middle to senior level management roles. Ongoing relationships between the alumni and the authors have resulted in a range of collaborative activities supporting the ongoing professional development of nurses.

The project described in this paper was conceptualised following a successful two day collaborative conference convened by the authors, the Health Department and local professional nursing associations in Sarawak on the Island of Borneo in 2006. This earlier initiative targeted clinical skill development and feedback suggested that participants also wished to enhance their clinical research skills and capacity. In response to this feedback, a professional development event was convened in conjunction with local nursing associations with the aim of meeting these previously identified needs.

Funding obtained from the Australia Malaysia Institute, within the Australian Government Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, was augmented by the School of Nursing and Midwifery at Monash University. This funding financed two-day seminars entitled *Nursing Research: Getting Started* conducted in two locations in Malaysia. The delivery of the initial seminar in Kuala Lumpur provided a central location suitable for attendance by nurses located in Peninsula Malaysia. The Sunway campus of Monash University in Malaysia proved an excellent location for this event, which was supported by local academic and administrative staff.

The second seminar was conducted in Sibu, in the East Malaysian state of Sarawak. Sibu is located off the tourist trail, and the size and geographical location of this town limits opportunities for professional development of nurses and other health care professionals. These limitations exist in spite of a supportive local state health department. In response

to requests from alumni of the School of Nursing and Midwifery, academic staff have, over recent years, contributed to previous professional development activities, culminating in this project.

The project was lead by Dr Melanie Birks, a Senior Lecturer at Monash University, who has had over ten years experience in teaching international students in various locations, most specifically Malaysia. Professor Karen Francis, Associate Professor Ysanne Chapman and Dr Jane Mills, also from the School of Nursing and Midwifery, brought to the project a wealth and diversity of research expertise. Ms Jo Porter was also included in the team as a beginning career researcher. Ms Maree Mills was assigned to the project in an administrative role.

SUPPORTING A RESEARCH CULTURE

The goal of supporting the development of a research culture for nurses in Malaysia drove the structure and content of the seminars. From the outset, the project team was committed to providing a professional development opportunity for nurses that met their specific needs. The aim of instilling a positive and 'can do' attitude amongst professional nurses functioning within the Malaysian health care system did not mean simply transplanting the research culture with which the Australian academics were familiar. The cumulative experience of the project team in teaching in the South East Asian region proved invaluable in planning for these seminars. This focused approach was further facilitated through working closely with local nurses in devising the content and structure of these events.

Having an established relationship with the profession in this region was instrumental in negotiating the challenges presented in the developmental stages of this project. These challenges included securing a suitable date for the event around local holidays and teaching commitments of the project team. The need to comply with local protocol was also an issue that required attention during the early developmental phases, including identifying the most appropriate individuals to organise, officiate and oversee the events.

The popularity of these sessions was evidenced by the considerable number of professionals in attendance in both Kuala Lumpur (over 150 participants) and Sibul (approximately 200 participants). As English is widely spoken in Malaysia it was the medium for delivery of the seminars which consisted of plenary sessions conducted on the morning of each day. Contemporary issues in nursing research were the focus of these sessions. The significance of the global evidence based nursing movement was explored and reinforced. Major research paradigms were introduced, trends in nursing research were explored and ethical and legal issues were examined. In both Kuala Lumpur and Sibul, local individuals from clinical and academic environments were invited to speak and delivered a context specific perspective on research in Malaysia. Participants were provided with a resource package that was inclusive of presentation handouts and associated reference lists.

Concurrent, interactive workshops formed the basis of the afternoon activities on both days of each seminar. In groups of 30 - 50, participants had the opportunity to critique research studies and discuss the application of research in their own clinical milieu. Basic statistics were introduced and demystified as participants were given the opportunity to develop quantitative questionnaires and engage in basic data collection and analysis. Participants were also able to examine principle forms of research dissemination, including the preparation of mock materials for the presentation of research findings at conferences. In this latter workshop, participants were encouraged to develop a poster as a means of displaying to others in their workplace what they had gained from their participation in the seminar.

Nurses with varying levels of practice experience from various clinical settings attended the seminars. Few participants were qualified to degree level or beyond. There was nonetheless a broad range of skills, experience and expertise amongst the participants in both locations, both professionally and in respect of research. Any lack of experience in research did not temper the high level of enthusiasm and motivation

amongst the participants. The popularity of the Sibul seminar saw the attendance of various allied health workers, including doctors, pharmacists and laboratory technicians. The multidisciplinary nature of the seminar was welcomed as relationships were fostered and a greater understanding of professional roles and research potential was to occur.

The diverse mix of participants proved a challenge to the project team. A commitment by presenters to ensure relevance of the seminars to all those who attended was reflected in the evolution of the seminar structure and content in response to formal and informal feedback obtained during these events. This approach ensured that all participants were able to take away from the seminar a feeling of achievement of individual professional goals. Most significantly, such timely response ensured that this rare opportunity for tailored professional development had maximum impact in the limited time available.

Seminar evaluations developed by the local organising committees were distributed to the participants and collated by a research assistant employed by the School of Nursing and Midwifery for review by all stakeholders. Participants were encouraged to provide honest feedback to ensure that future events would address specific needs and overcome any limitations or deficiencies identified by the participants. The evaluations demonstrated that both events were overwhelmingly well received and much appreciated by those who attended. This appreciation was particularly evident in Sibul where opportunities such as this are very limited. Evaluations also indicated a desire for further seminars that addressed more advanced skills. Participants demonstrated an appreciation of the importance of evidence based practice and were keen to continue to build their skills with the ultimate aim of undertaking research. The differing experience and ability of those attending the seminar was reflected in requests for both beginning and advanced research skills to be covered in future events.

Panel discussions at the end of each seminar echoed the desire of nurses to undertake research in their local setting. Perceived limitations in their ability to achieve this aim, largely as a result of lack of confidence, skills training and mentorship, was cited as the main hurdle. The immediate goal of the seminars was the development of skills in understanding research processes to enable professional nurses to evaluate and implement research in the practice setting. Participants were nonetheless encouraged to seek future collaborative opportunities for research. Academics from the School of Nursing and Midwifery at Monash University reinforced their commitment to assisting with overcoming barriers to the conduct and application of research and participants were encouraged to contact the project team for assistance where appropriate.

MAINTAINING MOMENTUM

The success of these seminars indicates their worth. The project team welcomed requests from participants for further professional development activities. A series of targeted future initiatives will be implemented to meet the needs identified by participants who attended the seminars. These initiatives include future conferences, seminars and workshops. A series of collaborative research endeavours in specific nursing specialisations are also proposed. These projects will include workshops in basic research concepts, including data collection and analysis. Skills training in writing for publication, along with other dissemination strategies, are under consideration for future events.

CONCLUSION

Recipients of nursing services have a right to receive health care based on contemporary, scientifically derived evidence. An increased awareness of the rights of individuals who enter the health care system fuels this commitment. Nurses represent the greatest number of professionals in the health care environment. In a world of ever increasing technological advancements and economic constraints, the need for solid rationale on which to base nursing interventions cannot be ignored. The challenges presented by globalisation are tempered by the advantages that living in a global society brings. One such advantage is the ability to share resources, experience and expertise for the development of professional colleagues in the international arena.

REFERENCES

- Burns, N. and Grove, S.K. 2008. *Understanding nursing research: Building and evidence-based practice*. 4th ed. St Louis: Saunders Elsevier.
- Leach, M. 2006. Evidence-based practice: A framework for clinical practice and research design. *International Journal of Nursing Practice*, 12(5):248-251.
- McKenna, H., Ashton, S. and Keeney, S. 2004. Barriers to evidence-based practice in primary care. *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, 45(2):178-189.
- Nagy, S. Lumby, J., McKinley, S. and Macfarlane, C. 2001. Nurses' beliefs about the conditions that hinder or support evidence-based nursing. *International Journal of Nursing Practice*, 7(5):314-321.
- Newell, R. and Burnard, P. 2006. *Vital notes for nurses: Research for evidence-based practice*. Oxford, UK: Blackwell.
- Olade, R. 2004. Evidence-Based Practice and Research Utilization Activities Among Rural Nurses. *Journal of Nursing Scholarship*, 36(3):220-225.
- Samy, F.A. 2006. *Government nurses not up to par* [cited 15 May 2006]. Available from <http://thestar.com.my/news/story.asp?file=/2006/5/15/naions/14242984&sec=nation>.
- Shamsudin, N. 2006. 30th Anniversary editorial. Better late than never. *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, 53(3):262-3