Factors affecting student nurses’ willingness to care for patients with HIV/AIDS

Literature Review

ABSTRACT

Topic: Factors affecting student nurses’ willingness to care for patients with HIV/AIDS

Background: Nurses attitudes to HIV/AIDS have been researched throughout the world and attitudes are perceived to be mainly negative. The attitudes of student nurses are rarely looked at during research. The aim of this literature review was to investigate what factors influenced the willingness to care of student nurses for patients with a diagnosis of HIV/AIDS. The objective of this review was to identify themes that emerged as influencing factors for the purposes of reviewing the literature.

Method: Research articles spanning 12 years form 1991-2003 were gathered and examined to select common and contrasting views. There were three themes which emerged from the literature and these will be discussed in the course of the text. The themes were as follows:

1. Homophobia
2. Education and Knowledge
3. Previous Experiences

Findings: The literature shows that the level of homophobic attitudes was relatively low among nursing students, although there were some inconsistencies with this view. Older studies showed more homophobic attitudes than newer studies which shows changing times in our society. Education and knowledge were factors that affected the
willingness to care of the students but it was shown that the way in which the education was delivered was just as important. Previous experiences also played a part in effecting the willingness to care of students for HIV/AIDS patients. The literature shows that students who have previous exposure to persons living with HIV/AIDS had a more positive outlook on the infection and were more willing to care.

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INTRODUCTION

A literature review is defined by Polit and Beck (2008) as “a critical summary of research on a topic of interest, often prepared to put a research problem in context.”

Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV), which is a “retrovirus that causes cell-mediated immunity to be compromised which leads to an increased susceptibility to opportunistic infection. It is spread by contact with blood or other bodily fluids.” (Brooker, 2006) Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS) which is “a specific phase of infection caused by HIV. It is defined by the presence of certain conditions in people known to have an HIV infection.” (Brooker, 2006)

Both of these conditions are fast becoming one of the words largest health problems. As there is no vaccine or cure for HIV/AIDS it has lead to people being ostracised from society. It has been, for many years, though that the spread was only through homosexual intercourse but further education and publications has brought society to know that it is spread through unprotected homo- and hetero-sexual intercourse, sharing of needles by intra-venous drug users and form mother to child while the child is in the uterus, among other routes. (Central Statistics Office (CSO), 2006)

The latest annual figures for the amount of people who have contracted HIV in Ireland are from 2006 and these figure show that 4,419 HIV infections have been recorded in Ireland to date. (Health Protection Surveillance Centre (HSPC), 2007) Annual figures for cases of AIDS reported in Ireland up to the end of 2006 were at 909 and of which 397 have died up to 2006. (Health Protection Surveillance Centre, 2007). These cases are those which have been reported to the HPSC the true incidences may be much higher.

Nurses and students alike are at the forefront in dealing with patients living with HIV/AIDS and as their code of conduct states, they must not be discriminatory in any way to patients. (An Bord Altranis, 2000) The author wished to find out about student nurses views regarding willingness to care for these patients.
SEARCH STRATEGY

There were many sources available to and utilised by the author. Electronic searches of databases such as CINAHL, ProQuest, Science Direct and Synergy were completed and articles were selected. The following were used as search terms: Student Nurses, attitudes, HIV, AIDS, HIV/AIDS and perceptions. 9 articles were useful from these searches. Also a manual search in the Periodicals section of The University of Dublin, Trinity College was performed. 2 articles were retrieved from this search.

Articles gathered ranged in dates from 1991-2003. It was necessary for the author to look as far back as 1991 as there was not a lot of literature regarding student nurses found during the searches. Of the 11 articles found 10 were quantitative studies and 1 was a literature review. The literature spanned the globe coming from Australia, Britain, Canada, Germany, Nigeria, Sweden and the USA.

The following themes emerged from the literature: homophobia; education and knowledge and previous experiences. The literature will be review under those themes.
Homophobia is defined by The Oxford Encyclopaedic English Dictionary (1991) as “hatred or fear of homosexuals.” The studies which were considered in this literature review showed a strong homophobic theme. Many of these articles showed positive attitudes to homosexuals but there were a small number of conflicting views.

Peate (2002) conducted a quantitative study to investigate the impact of HIV/AIDS on 138 students in a British Nursing School. The study found that 91% of students said that they would feel comfortable dealing with a patient who was of homosexual orientation. Similarly to this Lohrmann’s (2000) quantitative study showed that 93% of 180 German student nurses felt that homosexuality was an alternate lifestyle which was not to be condemned. However Lohrmann (2000) also showed that 94% of students did not feel as comfortable dealing with lesbian women as they did with women who were not identified to them as lesbian. Stiernborg (1992) produced a quantitative study regarding 231 Sydney Nursing student’s attitudes to HIV/AIDS. This study showed that there was a more balanced view to homosexuality with 31% showing positive attitudes and 26% having more negative attitudes. This also leaves 42% of the sample showing up in the uncertain category. This result could be because of the age of the study which is comparatively old compared to more recent studies of Peate (2002) and Lohrmann (2000).

Peate (2002) and Lohrmann (2000) also found that 91% and 95% of their respective samples did not feel that homosexuals who had contracted HIV/AIDS through homosexual contact were “getting what they deserved.” Another factor to note which these two articles have in common is that the samples showed that 78% and 76% respectively, would not feel comfortable instigating contact with a person known to the student to be homosexual. This may affect the student’s willingness to care for the patient if they are not willing to instigate conversation.

Interestingly Peate (2002) found that younger students and those who were more willing to care for patients with AIDS had less homophobic attitudes. Comparing this to Stiernborg (1992) we can see that there is a difference in opinion with regard to age in correlation to homophobia. Stiernborg (1992) shows that there is a positive
correlation with age and homophobia i.e. the older the student the less homophobia that particular student showed.

The general attitudes of students with regards to homophobia within the studies were found to be on the whole positive. Regarding Rondahl, Innala and Carlsson’s (2003) quantitative study into the attitudes of nursing staff and students towards HIV-infected and homosexual HIV-infected patients in Sweden and the wish to refrain from nursing, of which 165 students were interviewed, there was one particular student quote which was quite negative and particularly homophobic. “I have nothing against the common HIV-infected patient but I am against the homosexual HIV-infected patient. Why not castrate them so they can’t infect common decent people?” Also the results from Stiernborg (1992) which showed that 24% had negative and 42% had uncertain views on homosexual HIV-infected patients.

All and Sullivan (1997) conducted a quasi-experimental quantitative study to view the effects of an HIV/AIDS educational programme on the anxiety level among nursing students. 39 students took part in this study. The study may be seen as offensive and homophobic as it uses such terms as “a problem for the gays” and also the labelling of homosexuality in the same category as intra-venous drug users as “social issues.” This shows that homophobia may be everywhere not just among nursing students but among researchers and the wider general public. All and Sullivan (1997) have however come up with some interesting findings which will be discussed under the Education and Knowledge Theme.
EDUCATION AND KNOWLEDGE

Education and knowledge is a major tool in the fight against HIV/AIDS. From the literature we can see some trends developing such as the basic knowledge of HIV/AIDS, what kind of education is provided and whether this education actually increases the students’ willingness to care for patients with HIV/AIDS.

Peate (2002) showed by using a questionnaire to assess the knowledge levels of the immunopathology of HIV/AIDS that many students had a basic knowledge of AIDS i.e. many knew that there was no cure for AIDS (91%) this correlates with Lohrmann’s (2000) study which found that 92% knew the answer to this question also. 100% of Peate’s (2002) students and also 100% of Lohrmann’s (2000) sample knew that AIDS affects the immune system. This shows that from these studies the students appear to have a basic level of understanding about AIDS. When it came to the more in depth knowledge regarding the physiological aspects of the AIDS disease process the students found it more difficult. This is shown in the research by Peate (2002) and Lohrmann (2000) whose studies reveal that 68% and 40% respectively were unsure or did not know what the function of granulocytes was. A study by Snowden (1997) conducted a quantitative study to investigate whether nursing students altered their attitudes and knowledge level regarding HIV/AIDS after a 3 year programme leading to registration as a nurse. This study consisted of a sample of 58 1st year students and 54 3rd year students. It showed that the knowledge of 3rd year nursing students had 18.5% greater knowledge than 1st year students in the same 3 year pre-registration nursing course. This shows that the education process works as it increases knowledge thus willingness to care.

Knowledge regarding the transmission route and high risk groups in society was also examined by a number of studies. Peate (2002) showed that 96% of students correctly identified intra venous drug users, individuals that practice unsafe sex and prostitutes are among these so called high risk groups. 99% of Lohrmann et al’s (2000) sample of students could also correctly point out that these individuals were in the high risk group. Peate (2002) and Lohrmann (2000) also showed in their study that 86% and 97% respectively knew that HIV was not limited to homosexual intercourse but that it could be contracted by heterosexual intercourse also.
Synoground & Kellmer-Langan’s (1991) quantitative study into nursing students’ attitudes towards AIDS and the implications for education it was shown that an average of over 50% of students, the total sample comprised of 87, did not feel they had adequate educational preparation to care for patients with HIV/AIDS. Another interesting fact from this study is that 52% of students did not feel they had enough knowledge and facts to deal with the families or friends of AIDS patients.

It is also interesting to note that All and Sullivan’s (1997) study shows that an educational programme has the ability to lower anxiety levels of nursing students who are dealing with patients with HIV/AIDS. The lower anxiety levels in turn increased the willingness of the students to care for these patients.

In the studies carried out by Peate (2002), Lohrmann (2000), Uwakwe (2000), All and Sullivan (1997), Snowden (1997), Stiernborg (1992) and Synoground and Kellmer-Langan (1991) it was shown that increasing the knowledge base of HIV/AIDS for student nurses has also increased their willingness to care. The teaching and education has achieved this in a number of ways, by firstly giving the students a better understanding of HIV/AIDS, by decreasing negative attitudes towards HIV/AIDS and by decreasing anxiety levels of students in relation to HIV/AIDS patient care. There is however a conflicting argument put forward by Valois et al (2001), who conducted a quantitative study to investigate the influence of a persuasive strategy on nursing students’ (74 was the sample size) beliefs and attitudes toward provision of care to people living with HIV/AIDS, which states that it is not solely the education and knowledge which changes the attitudes, decreases fear and anxiety levels but that the education must be delivered in a way which gives a positive outlook to students regarding HIV/AIDS care.

“Nurses are in a prime position to offer health education to those who are HIV infected or who have AIDS and also to the general public. In addition, nurses need to be offering informed care to their patients and are in need themselves of information in order to support them while they do their job.” (Snowden, 1997)
PREVIOUS EXPERIENCES

The theme of previous experiences seems to be one of debate with many articles claiming that it has a positive effect on willingness to care and others saying the opposite. The author has however found that in the main that the experiences of caring for patients living with HIV/AIDS has shown to elicit a positive effect on students.

Peate (2002) has found that students with previous exposure to caring for patients with AIDS has proven to increase their willingness to care for these patients by 6.2% as opposed to students who have had no previous experiences of caring for those individuals. Similarly Synoground and Kellmer-Langan (1991) have shown that students who have previous experience of caring for patients with HIV/AIDS had a 5.2% more positive attitude than those who hadn’t.

Lohrmann et al (2000) found that students who cared for patients with HIV/AIDS were slightly more knowledgeable about the disease. This implies, from what has been discussed in the previous theme, that students who were more knowledgeable, were more willing to care for these individuals. In contrast to this argument Stiernborg (1992) found that there were only small insignificant differences in knowledge between those who had cared for a patient with HIV/AIDS and those who hadn’t. There was a correlation however between attitudes and previous experiences with patients with HIV/AIDS, this leads us to think that the more positive attitudes towards HIV/AIDS, the more willing students are to care for such patients.

Rondahl et al (2003) found that students expressed fear towards caring for person with HIV/AIDS. It is explained that the most plausible reason for this is the students’ lack of experience. Increased experience could then logically reduce fear thus implying an increase in the students’ willingness to care for these patients.
In conflict with these points, Leasure, Hawkins McKenny & Merrill (1995) who conducted a quantitative study to investigate the factors influencing the attitudes which 212 baccalaureate nursing students had towards people living with AIDS. The researchers concluded from their study that increasing exposure to people living with AIDS did not necessarily promote more positive attitudes.
CONCLUSION

The purpose of this Literature Review was to investigate the factors affecting student nurses’ willingness to care for patients with HIV/AIDS. It is evident that there are many different views within the particular themes but it can be safely said that most of the views are of a positive nature.

The homophobia of students towards homosexuals with HIV/AIDS was to a large extent unfounded. There was however a small amount of homophobia found. This shows the dynamic and differences in society which will for the foreseeable future shall continue. Homosexuality is a way of life which is atypical of tradition and thus society shall view it in a different light. What is interesting is that homophobia seems to be fading out with time as we seen it in the earlier publications such as Stiernborg (1992) and there is significantly less homophobia in the relatively new studies of Peate (2002) and Lohrmann (2000).

The education theme showed that students had a basic understanding of the disease process, students also had a good knowledge of transmission route, they also could identify the high risk groups within society and that it was no longer viewed as a disease mainly populated by homosexuals. The areas where gaps in the knowledge occurred were the more complex functions of individual cells within the immune system and facts of the disease process which they would have to communicate to family and friends. Most of the studies showed that knowledge had a positive influence on students’ willingness to care which shows that effective educational programmes should be put in place to ensure that patients living with HIV/AIDS get the best care possible.

The theme of previous experiences shows conflicting views but most of them to be leaning to the positive side of the argument, putting forward ideas such as how previous exposure has positive effects on attitudes thus willingness to care and statements portraying students who have never cared for a patient with HIV/AIDS being fearful whereas students who have previous exposure to caring for people with HIV/AIDS were more willing to care for them again.
Particular emphasis should be put on the training of nursing students, as skilled nursing staff with humane attitudes towards people with AIDS and a high knowledge level regarding the disease and its treatment is essential in order to reach that aim. (Lohrmann, 2000)

RECOMMENDATIONS

Whilst reviewing the literature available on the topic the author found no studies which were conducted in the Republic of Ireland. It could be beneficial to find out from an Irish perspective what student nurses attitudes are relating to the care they provide to patients with HIV/AIDS and whether they feel they are adequately trained in this area. It would be of benefit to investigate whether Irish nursing education shows any benefits or shortfalls in the teaching of HIV/AIDS care. As Valimaki, Suominen and Peate (1997) suggest in their review of the research on attitudes of professionals, students and the general public to HIV/AIDS and people with HIV/AIDS “Surveys are also needed to compare attitudes of nursing students towards AIDS and AIDS patients in different countries.” The author feels that this could be an area of interest for future studies.
REFERENCES


Snowden, L. (1997) An investigation into whether nursing students alter their attitudes and knowledge levels regarding HIV infection and AIDS following a 3-year programme leading to registration as a qualified nurse. Journal of Advanced Nursing 25: 1167-1174.


