

Role of Nurses in Mental Health Research .

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Abstract

The role functioning of psychiatric nurse as primary care giver, educator and researcher has been viewed in the context of modern developments in the field of mental health and mental health nursing. The need for knowledge base and practice base are emphasized with a brief review of research studies in which nurses are involved and suggestions for further psychiatric nursing research programmes are offered for the development of psychiatric nursing in India.

The growing field of mental health advocates the need for interdisciplinary approach in different activities aiming at promotion of mental health, early diagnosis and treatment of mental disorders, mental retardation and after care, and rehabilitation of the mentally disabled [1]. The World Health Organisation recommends that non-medical health professionals, non-professionals, volunteers and local leaders need to be involved in effective mental health programmes, specially in developing countries [2]. In this context all mental health professionals should contribute to the development of innovative programmes in the field of mental health. Each mental health profession has got its own philosophy, ethics, knowledge, principles, methods and techniques which are intended to improve the quality of service to the mentally ill, mentally handicapped and other sections of the society. Similarly nursing profession with its noble goal and vast historical perspectives has a vital role in institutional and non-institutional mental health settings. To effectively function in such settings the psychiatric nurse should be equipped with advanced knowledge of service, teaching and research in nursing.

The role of the nurse as a provider of primary care does not require any elaboration as the curriculum for nursing training predominantly covers the service component [3]. In psychiatric setting the nurse is the only professional who spends maximum time with the patients. This kind of interaction with the patients enables the nurse to know better about the patients' background and problems in all dimensions. So the skills and knowledge of nurse contributes significantly in helping the patients and their distressed families. Nurse being a role model - can use every minute of her/his contact with patients and relatives for therapeutic benefit of the patients and families [4]. He/she becomes the first person to know even the intricate details about the patients' life situations. Thus she becomes the important source of information to other professionals like psychiatrists, psychologists and psychiatric social workers. Many a time, such informations are needed not only for therapeutic or teaching purposes but also for research purposes. The conclusions about the diagnosis and formulation of the treatment techniques are mainly influenced by the keen observation of nurse [6]. In a research team conducting research in different aspects of primary care, the nurse is an indispensable person [6]. In addition to rendering nursing care to the patient, the nurse also helps in research activities. For example, in experiments like drug trials the observations of the psychiatric nurse on sleep pattern, clinical improvement, side effects, toxic effects of drugs and patient's behaviour in the ward, eating pattern etc., form a major part of the study [5]. Similarly, to assess the efficacy of different psychosocial therapies like individual counselling, family counselling, group therapy, rehabilitation and recreational therapies nurses' contribution becomes significant. In institutions like NIMHANS with the aims of service,

training and research, such participation in research programme becomes one of the routine activities of psychiatric nurses. When the nurses' services are tended to out-patients, patients in rehabilitation units, domiciliary care in community settings and mental health camps, their primary care services are inseparably inter-twined with systematic research studies or action oriented experimental projects [7].

In addition to her different service programmes, the nurse helps the mental health trainees, specially nursing trainees, acquire the skills of humanitarian approach towards the patients. This education or training is important at different levels. Some are formal occasions like ward rounds and group discussions. For instance, a trainee nurse learns about psychiatric nursing practice through her postings with the trained nurse. Such experiential learning occurs when trainees participate in group therapy, family counselling, rehabilitation and recreational therapies. By virtue of her close association with the trainees during her in-formal educational process she helps in assessing the trainees' interest, aptitudes, attitudes and values and general performance in a particular learning situation. In addition to these routine teaching and training assignments pioneering institutions like NIMHANS offer opportunities to nurses to participate in training the multipurpose health workers and Auxiliary Nurse Midwives in mental health care delivery. Such unique participation becomes part and parcel of ongoing research programmes of evaluating the effectiveness of these trainees in rendering mental health care in rural areas [8].

The psychiatric nurse has been involved in many collaborative mental health research schemes. Most of these researches are conducted by more than one discipline. Irrespective of the design of the research schemes, the nurse contributes to the successful completion of the projects-whether it is a study on patients' attitudes towards hospitalization or evaluation of new techniques like token economy or occupational therapy or other programmes for chronic patients. In fact, the nurse as a researcher has a lot more participation in community oriented service programmes. Especially psychiatric epidemiology [9], community management of the mentally ill [10], and their follow up pattern require researcher's skills of a nurse [11]. Areas like mental health education and assessment of different educative methods call for the nurse's skills as a researcher. Thus the nurse is an active member of any research programme conducted in hospital or community settings.

Psychiatric nursing, being relatively younger discipline, requires a lot of ground work in order to strengthen its knowledge base. Many of the nursing principles need to be modified considering the multifarious psychiatric problems. Such modifications are needed more in developing countries. Certain methods need to be evolved to tackle new challenges mainly posed by poverty, illiteracy, unemployment and other such social problems. All this should pave way for creation of psychiatric nursing services suited to Indian setting. These efforts in terms of research would be indispensable for the growth and development of psychiatric nursing in India. This would also bring indigenous materials for teaching psychiatric nursing. Such researches need to be carried out by nursing educators and highly experienced practitioners.

For instance, the principle that patient should be allowed to take his own decision could be put into systematic test How far this is feasible especially with the illiterate and rural population; if it needs modification, to what extent. Similar issues could be taken for enriching knowledge base of the profession. Research in this area is significant in its absence in the field of psychiatric nursing in India.

The skills, techniques and methods need to be developed in order to make our practice meet the demands of the reality. For example, how far the nurse can function as a therapist, and what are the problems that a nurse is likely to face in his/her therapeutic role [12]. These questions could be adequately answered by undertaking research programmes wherein the nurse acts as a therapist. This, for example, could be done by having a project in which the patients are treated in their home settings with the nurse as a visiting therapist under the guidance of a psychiatrist. Similarly, in a project in which token economy is implemented, the contribution made by the psychiatric nurse could be assessed [13].

Specific techniques need to be evolved in order to impart training to the mentally retarded persons. These collective efforts of research would no doubt strengthen the practice base of profession.

The developments made in each discipline must be proportionate. Otherwise one profession will be ahead of other profession causing disparities in standards of service. So the scope of nursing research is vast and unlimited. Different new avenues like family psychiatry, community psychiatry and rehabilitation pose different challenges and questions

which could be answered only through research. The nursing researcher should bear in mind Rudyard Kipling's words as quoted by Gopal [14] in the context of research procedure in social sciences.

"I Keep six honest serving men

They taught me all I know;

Their names are what and why and when

And how and where and who "

With this inquisitive approach, curiosity, fertile imagination and love of experimental study, the psychiatric nurse can really contribute to her/his own professional development as well as development of other professions.

As we have seen the development in practice base would enrich the knowledge base and vice versa. This promotes educational components, which in turn are achieved through research. So any comprehensive nursing programme would involve all these three dimensions. In an Indian setting though service and education are given importance, research is not given its due place [15]. This leads to stagnation of knowledge ultimately making us lag behind others in the field. This limitation need to be looked into by the nursing practitioners, educationists and researchers. These three will tend to give a balanced growth to the psychiatric nursing field.

The nurses are involved in action oriented research schemes like efficacy of new drugs being tested or new techniques of follow up are tried out with the experimental and control groups. In some instances he actively participates in exploring the new facts or describing the phenomena about which little is known. All these studies are conducted in hospital and community settings. Some are biological studies and others are psychological studies.

One of the studies carried out at NIMHANS' Community Psychiatry Unit used nurse as a visiting therapist for domiciliary care patients [16]. In this experiment two groups of mentally ill (with the similar diagnosis, severity and socio economic & cultural background) were exposed to two different kinds of treatment - the first group was given traditional treatment in the hospital setting, the second group was treated in the home setting with the services of psychiatric nurse who visited the patients periodically with the guidance of a psychiatrist. The assessment showed significant difference between these two groups in terms of clinical, psychological and social aspects. The second group of patients treated with the visiting nurse services at home setting improved faster and better than the first group treated in the hospital.

The nurses are involved in epidemiological studies to assess the prevalence of mental disorders, epilepsy, mental retardation and ill defined somatic symptoms study [17]. In yet another study the psychiatric nurse took active part in follow up of the mentally ill in the rural community [11]. In this study the nurse had given informal mental health education to the family and neighbours and she motivated the patients who were on irregular medication. Domiciliary care too was offered by her. This programme was followed up for 3 ½ years. Reasons for poor follow up were found to be deep rooted ignorance and mis-conceptions, poverty, health considered low in the priority list, poor transport facility, delay in improvement with the drugs and side effects of the drugs. Similarly nurses are involved in different mental health research works directly or indirectly. Most of the studies conducted in the hospital dealt with evaluation of certain modalities of treatment like Electro Convulsive Therapy, new psychotropic drugs and family therapies. Thus in the research work the nurse plays the following roles in the field of mental health.

- (1) Visiting therapist for domiciliary care
 - (2) Mental Health Educator and trainer
 - (3) Motivator for regular follow ups.
 - (4) Participant and non-participant observer
 - (5) Research assistant
 - (6). As an investigator.
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Conclusions

The potentials of a nurse as a researcher is not well recognized by nurses themselves as well as other professionals. Advanced nursing curriculum pays more emphasis on research methodology and instill research-mindedness in the nurses, their contribution would be meaningful and more useful to the professional development. As we do not have much literature in psychiatric nursing in India, we have to largely depend on the literature available in U.S.A. As the psychiatric nursing has to deal with psycho, socio-cultural and spiritual aspects, it is urgently required to test the suitability of psychiatric nursing techniques and principles under Indian circumstances. This can be an useful area of research in psychiatric nursing field right now.

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