

This column will highlight education and practice issues for research and research application. Our aim is to increase awareness and comfort with research and to demonstrate that research can be user-friendly.

Introductory courses in research methods: Are we fostering a positive attitude?

by Priscilla M. Koop

The purpose of this column is to reflect on how we might encourage nurses to use research literature in practice and to engage in research when the opportunity presents itself. There are many published recommendations in the research utilization literature for increasing research utilization among staff nurses and clinical nurse specialists (e.g. Hundley, Milne, Leighton-Beck, Graham, & Fitzmaurice, 2000; Kajermo, Nordström, Krusebrant, & Björvell, 2000; Mackay, 1998; Omery & Williams, 1999). In this column, I will explore why we need to rethink the way we introduce students to the utilization and conduct of nursing research.

Research utilization involves at least two components, according to Estabrooks (1999a): instrumental utilization and conceptual utilization. Instrumental utilization involves "concrete application of the research, and the research is normally translated into a ...useable form, such as a

protocol" (p. 204). Conceptual utilization, on the other hand, involves the use of research to change one's thinking about clinical practice. These components tend to be discussed as a single entity in much of the research utilization literature. Their use in practice, however, requires different levels of expertise and time commitment. These differences need to be reflected in our teaching of introductory research methods to nursing students.

I argue that a reasonable expectation of all nurses in clinical practice is the conceptual utilization of research literature. The conceptual utilization of research literature requires reflective and critical thinking skills, as well as a positive attitude toward research. Research courses in undergraduate nursing programs can contribute significantly to the development of these skills and attitudes in nursing students.

Instrumental research utilization, on the other hand, involves a lengthy and complicated process (see for example,

Mackay, 1998; Rosswurm & Larrabee, 1999) and requires expertise in research methods, statistical analysis, and change management. Conducting instrumental research utilization projects may be a reasonable expectation of clinical nurse specialists (although Mackay, 1998, argues "not necessarily"), but is likely beyond the capacity and mandate of staff nurses. I suspect that when staff nurses claim a lack of expertise in research methods as the reason why they do not use the research literature in their practice (Pearcey, 1995), they are thinking of instrumental utilization. It is no wonder that they feel a lack of expertise!

Given the mandate of introductory nursing research courses to help students become intelligent consumers of the research literature, it seems to me that we need to reflect on the research utilization skills and attitudes which will be required of our students when they engage in clinical nursing practice. I argue that our graduates need excellent conceptual utilization skills and a positive attitude towards research. Valuing nursing research is a particularly important outcome of introductory research courses, since a positive attitude towards research predicts the use of the research literature in clinical practice (Champion & Leach, 1989; Estabrooks, 1999b).

Much of the research utilization literature focuses on how to get nurses to engage in

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research utilization. Only fairly recently have authors suggested that we examine the philosophical (e.g. Kitson, 1999) and practical (e.g. Mackay, 1998) issues surrounding research utilization by practising nurses. No research utilization literature was found that encouraged academics to reflect on how our introductory research courses might better foster the skills and attitudes necessary for competent research utilization by nurses.

Current introductory research methods courses for undergraduate nursing students typically involve teaching them the research process (at a basic level) and an introduction to the instrumental utilization of nursing research in practice. A typical assignment involves critiquing published research literature. Although such foci introduce students to the skills involved in research, and are meant to help them develop an aptitude for excellence, they may have some unintended side effects. Most notably, research critiques may contribute to an attitude of perfectionism (if the research has flaws, it should not be used in clinical practice), negativity (since little published research is flawless, nursing research has little to contribute to clinical practice), and discouragement (the work needed to change practice based on research findings is too difficult, so why bother?).

I find it baffling that we use research critiques to introduce students to the utilization and conduct of nursing research. We teach the use of the nursing process and psychomotor skills without asking our students to watch expert nurses and then critique them. Why do we teach introductory research methods by asking our students to

critique the work of others? Research methods are a complex set of skills, as is the use of the nursing process and the development of psychomotor skills. Perhaps our way of teaching research methods is one of those "habits" that we academics need to reflect on. We need to think about what we are trying to accomplish and then to change our teaching practices so they are consistent with our goals - to produce intelligent consumers of nursing research; consumers with a positive attitude.

How do we teach conceptual research utilization skills? How do we teach a positive attitude toward nursing research? Perhaps we will need to reflect on our own attitudes and skills and then determine how to teach them to our students. Perhaps we will need to break down the complexity into simple components. It is clear, however, that we will need to accept our portion of the responsibility for the lack of research utilization among staff nurses, and then revise our teaching methods. I invite nursing educators to reflect on what is needed and on how we might achieve it.

Armed with the skills needed to utilize nursing research at a conceptual level and a positive attitude toward nursing research, our graduates may be more likely to use the research literature to reflect on their practice. When they are ready to move into graduate studies, they may then be ready to learn the more difficult skills needed for instrumental research utilization. The ability to critique published studies is a crucial component of instrumental research utilization, and such an assignment would be justified at a graduate level research methods course.

The purpose of this column is to urge nursing educators to reflect on how we teach introductory research methods courses to undergraduate nursing students. We need to examine the expectations of our graduates as a result of the research methods course and to make certain that the foci of the course are consistent with those expectations. I argue that staff nurses need to be competent conceptual users of research and that we need to change our research methods courses to assist them in acquiring the necessary skills and attitude.

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