ABSTRACT

This descriptive research aimed to investigate perceptions and attitudes of the 3rd year nursing students towards psychiatric patients during clinical practice. The participants were 63 of 3rd year nursing students of Boromarajonani College of Nursing Changwat Nonthaburi. The students were interviewed using a questionnaire on knowledge of psychiatric theories, psychiatric patients, feelings of psychiatric patients, feelings on practicing, and semi-structured interview about their needs for help from supervisors and staff. Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics and content analysis. The results found that 82.6 percent of nursing students had some knowledge of psychiatric theories. Most of the students perceived that the mental patients were people who had perception disturbances (52.2%) and thought disturbances (39.1%). Around half of the students (56.5%) feared psychiatric patients and felt pity for them (47.8%). Students were excited during practicing (47.8%). They needed their teachers to summarize core concepts of mental health and psychiatric nursing, teach them without any pressure, check their assignments and give them feedback, provide counseling, and encourage them during the practice. Students also needed staff at the hospital to give advice and opportunity as well as provide support and help during the time of need. As the results of the study, the students should be prepared before practicing at the hospital about 1) knowledge about core concepts of psychiatric theories, mental health, psychiatric nursing and 2) attitudes towards the psychiatric patients. The results would shed some light on how to build a good understanding of students and patients and to reduce the stigma toward mentally ill patients.

Keywords: nursing student, perception, attitude, psychiatric patient

1 All correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Dr. Sudkhanoung Ritruechai, Boromarajonani College of Nursing Changwat Nonthaburi at email: sudkhanoungp@hotmail.com
Background

When patients are diagnosed with a mental disorder they are stigmatized as a psychiatric patient, and this stigma will also stick with them throughout their life (Selcuk & Tayfun, 2013). Based on the public opinion polls in Thai and foreign societies, it was found that most people lack knowledge about mental health problems and psychiatric disorder. This results in inaccurate perceptions and negative attitudes towards psychiatric patients (ABAC-KSC Internet Poll Research Center, 2006). Most people understand that psychiatric patients are dangerous. Patients may have aggressive behavior and sometimes cannot control themselves or sometimes have inappropriate actions and decisions. As a result, people do not want to be near or interact with patients. In fact, only three percent of psychiatric patients have severe reactions. Various media also exaggerated the presentation of patients. Thus the image of people with a mental health condition is distorted (Kittirattanapaiboony, 2006). This stigma has a significant impact on the lives of psychiatric patients both in everyday life such as having relationships with others, finding work, living with others in the shelter and medical care when an injury is received. Society does not accept and try to exclude patients from their groups. The effect is also on the patient's family. From these results, the patient attempts to conceal his symptoms and refuse to accept treatment from a psychiatrist which escalate the severity of the symptoms. Society is also more terrified and disgusted with patients. This cycle is still going on.

Public health contributes to stigma in psychiatric patients as well. In the psychiatric ward, there is a distinctive structure, such as a grill, a separate room for patients, when a patient is hospitalized, they will be obliged to give up some rights. Patients must also comply with the rules of the building and must attend a variety of activities, which are different from their daily life (Kittirattanapaiboony, 2006). In both the healthcare setting and general hospital, fear of mental illness and lack of confidence in the management of mental illness may make the team neglect critical physical disorders. For example, patients with respiratory distress are sent from the general hospital to a psychiatric hospital with the talk of ignorance and without estimating the symptoms of exhaustion which is caused by the patient's pneumonia. Moreover the belief that mental illness cannot be cured or the belief that mental illness is a self-inflicted disease, people with mental problems are not adequately cared.

Also, the experience of medical students and nursing students may result in students having incorrect perceptions, a negative attitude and add a stigma to psychiatric patients (Chincharoensup, Disro, Vittayanont. 2014). Students will also learn theoretical and practical aspects of psychiatry but very little compared to academic and physical training. During practice, students often find patients with severe psychiatric illness to be sometimes aggressive patients. Which can make them feel scared or sometimes find a chronic patient having a history of hospitalization frequently (Taengbunngam, Chaiyapan, & Pitanupong, 2015). It seems that psychiatry is an incurable disease. Students will also have the opportunity to meet very few outside patients, despite the fact that with the actual work, most psychiatric patients are in the general hospital.

At Boromarajonani College of Nursing Changwat Nonthaburi students will be taught theoretical aspects of nursing care for individuals with mental illness in the third year of the first semester, and to practice the practicing of mental health nursing in the second and third semesters. Based on the observations and past teaching and learning management of some mental health and psychiatric nurses, it was found that the perceptions and attitudes towards psychiatric patients have a significant impact on academic achievement, theoretical and practical training of students. However, no study has been conducted to evaluate perceptions and attitudes towards psychiatric patients especially before practicing. This will be the first experience that students will be able to train with mentally ill patients who are apparently symptomatic in
psychiatric wards.

Therefore, the research team was interested in studying the perceptions and attitudes towards psychiatric patients of the 3rd year nursing students during practical training in mental health nursing practice at Srithanya Hospital. The results of this study would be useful to develop a positive perception and positive attitude of nursing students towards psychiatric patients. The results would also be used to develop teaching and learning methods in practice. Once the student finishes the study and work related to psychiatric patients they would be confidence in care, have had a positive attitude and help psychiatric patients escape the stigma.

Objective

To study perceptions and attitudes towards psychiatric patients of the 3rd year nursing students in the clinical practice of the nursing care of persons with mental health problems practicum subject.

Methods

Participants: Sixty-three 3rd year nursing students (31 students in Section A and 32 students in Section B) studied in Semester 2 and 3 of Academic Year 2010 at Boromarajonani College of Nursing Changwat Nonthaburi.

Conceptual framework:

Perceptions and attitudes affect the expression or behaviors of people. The theoretical approach used in this research aimed to study perceptions and attitudes towards psychiatric patients in the third year nursing students during practice.

Perception is a crucial learning foundation for a person. In general, any behavioral responses depend on the understanding of their environment and the ability to interpret the condition. Therefore, active learning is based on dynamic cognitive factors and stimuli. The perceptual factors include senses and mental factors such as knowledge, needs, and attitudes. Perception consists of three processes, namely, exposure, interpretation, and emotion. Perception is the result of the use of the sensory-motor, which is called the sensor (Sensory), the five types are the eye, ear, nose, tongue, and skin. Perception depends on what influences or factors in knowledge are the characteristics of the receiver. When a stimulus determines to learn, it must be realized first. As the perception is the way to interpret meaning that is understandable, this means that perception is the basis of learning. If no awareness occurs, learning cannot happen. Perception is an essential element that brings together ideas. The human attitude, which is the most crucial part of the teaching process and the use of teaching materials is required to achieve the most accurate perception. Therefore having a right stimulus and having a whole perception element will also result in better learning, with awareness being an essential part of the perception.

Attitude is an essential concept in social psychology. In general, attitude means feeling, thinking, or belief and the tendency to express the behavior of the person. The attitude is also an interactive reaction by estimating whether or not you like it. It affects a person's positive or negative response to a person, things, and circumstances in the environment of the person. The attitude can be learned or managed using experience, and that can be understood or interpreted from what people say unofficially or from a formal survey or the behaviors of those individuals.
Although psychologists and academics have given a different meaning to the attitude, the characteristics of the overall position could be summarized as follows.

1. Attitude is something that can be learned.
2. Attitude is a protracted, lasting nature.
3. Attitude is the value of self-evaluation to say good or not good; like or dislike.
4. Attitude makes a person's ownership ready to respond to the meaning of the attitude.
5. Attitude tells the relationship between a person and a person, a person and an object, and what situation the person is at.

Attitude can be classified into three categories.

1. Positive attitude. They are the right feelings towards the environment or accepting it.
2. Negative attitudes. They are expressions or emotions towards the situation in a way such as not being satisfied, not good enough, not accepting, and not agreeing.
3. No attitude or neutral attitude. It happens because that person has no understanding of that subject or for that matter.

It can be seen that the expression of attitude comes from the formation of accumulated attitude as thoughts and feelings can show various behaviors. The attitude also comes out according to the attitudes towards the person, things, and situations.

**Tools:** The first instrument was a questionnaire which had 38 items about knowledge on psychiatric disorders and nursing theory (one item), meaning of psychiatric patients (19 items), feelings for psychiatric patients (ten items), and feelings for practicing in the psychiatric ward (eight items) based on their perceptions and attitudes. A score of each item was rated from 1-5. The second one was a semi-structured interview question about needs for help from the teachers and staff.

**Data collection:**

Data were collected in 2010. On the first day of practicing, the researcher team explained the research study to the students and asked for their permission. 63 third year nursing students were interested in the study and signed a consent form. All of them were women aged between 19-24 years old. Students were interviewed using the questionnaire and semi-structured interview questions.

The data were obtained for completeness before analyzing. Students also attended the focus groups to assess the accuracy of the data.

**Data analysis:** Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics and content analysis.

**Results**

The study found the perceptions and attitudes towards psychiatric patients of the 3rd year nursing students in clinical practice of the nursing care of persons with mental health problems practicum subject as followed;
1. Level of knowledge of psychiatric disorders and nursing theory.

It was found that a large number of the nursing students (82.6%) had some knowledge and the rest of them had (17.4%) little knowledge of psychiatric disorders and nursing theory.

2. Meaning of psychiatric patients based on perceptions of nursing students

Half of the student (50%) perceived that the psychiatric patients were a person with perceptual disturbances. Around 39.1 percent and 30.4 percent of students perceived psychiatric patients as a person with thought and decision disturbances, respectively. The students said:

"Psychiatric patients refer to individuals with mental problems. Perception goes away resulting in abnormal gestures and speech." (Student 10)

"Psychiatric patient refers to patients with mental disorders who cannot make decisions, have discontinuity when thinking, does not think logically and does not know what they are doing." (Student 20)

Meaning of psychiatric patients from nursing students’ perceptions are summarized in Table 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Meaning of psychiatric patients</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Perceptual disturbances</td>
<td>52.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Thought disturbances</td>
<td>39.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Inability to make a decision</td>
<td>30.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Abnormal behavior</td>
<td>21.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Lack of self-awareness</td>
<td>21.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Need treatment</td>
<td>21.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Personality change</td>
<td>17.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Out of touch with reality</td>
<td>13.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Cannot control themselves</td>
<td>13.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Cannot adapt to society and the environment</td>
<td>8.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Mood swings</td>
<td>8.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. Deficiencies in building relationships and living with others</td>
<td>8.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. Abnormal movement</td>
<td>8.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14. Nervous system disorders</td>
<td>8.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15. Patients with curable diseases</td>
<td>8.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16. Communication disorder</td>
<td>4.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17. Patients who have to rely on others</td>
<td>4.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18. Several types of patients, each with different symptoms</td>
<td>4.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19. Symptoms can be aggravated or reversible</td>
<td>4.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3. Feelings for psychiatric patients based on attitudes of nursing students

Around half of the students (56.5%) feared the patients and felt pity for them (47.8%). The students said:

"I feel that psychiatric patients are scary because they might go insane and..."
attack others.” (Student 7)

“I feel scared because I do not know what patients are thinking and I do not know how to talk to patients.” (Student 49)

The students’ attitude towards psychiatric patients were summarized in Table 2.

Table 2: Feeling for psychiatric patients based on attitudes of the 3rd year nursing students

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Feelings for psychiatric patients</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Scared of patients</td>
<td>56.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Pity the patients</td>
<td>47.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Feel sympathy for the patients</td>
<td>17.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Feel that psychiatric patients are the ones who should be respected and cared for like the general patients</td>
<td>13.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Interested in the patients</td>
<td>4.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Excited from the patients</td>
<td>4.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Feel awkward to talk to the patients</td>
<td>4.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Worried about the patients</td>
<td>4.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Neutral feeling</td>
<td>4.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Dislike the patients</td>
<td>4.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

4. Feelings towards practicing in the psychiatric ward

Throughout the course, students practice only once in the psychiatric hospital. This was the first experience that students would practice with psychiatric patients in the psychiatric ward. Most of the students (47.8%) were excited about the practice.

As a student said, “I am excited because I have never trained in the psychiatric ward. I do not know what to expect and how to behave.” (Student 53)

Another student added, “I am excited and interested because it’s the only one chance to practice.” (Student 38)

The students were also afraid that they would not be able to carry out activities assigned to them in practical training. As they said:

“I was scared when I organized group activities for patients because I thought I wouldn’t do it good enough.” (Student 16)

“I felt a little afraid to practice psychiatry, to talk and build relationships with the patients.” (Student 25)

Feelings towards practicing in the psychiatric ward of nursing students are detailed in Table 3.

Table 3 Feelings towards practicing in the psychiatric ward of the 3rd year nursing students

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Feeling towards practicing in the psychiatric ward</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Excited from the practical exercises</td>
<td>47.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Scared from practical exercises</td>
<td>21.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Feeling towards practicing in the psychiatric ward | Percentage
---|---
3. Happy form practical exercises | 13.0
4. Worried from practical exercises | 13.0
5. Hated practical exercises | 8.7
6. Felt that practical exercises were hard | 8.7
7. Felt unconfident in the practical exercises | 4.4
8. Thought that this practice was different from method in other subjects | 4.4

5. Needs for help from the teachers and staff

The students needed the teachers help them to keep the practice running smoothly by:

1) Summarizing core concepts of mental health and psychiatric nursing and making the contents easy to understand.

2) Teaching and guiding students who do not know or have misunderstanding or misconduct while not putting pressure on the students

3) Inspecting and providing feedback on the assigned work including criticizing activities and telling the students what to improve.

4) Advising the students when problems occur.

5) Explaining and answering the students’ questions and do not expose the students to study on their own.

6. Encouraging the students during the practice.

The students needed the staff helps them to keep the practice running smoothly by:

1) Comforting the students about setting and equipment during practicing.

2) Providing opportunities for students in taking care of patients to have the most experiences.

3) Teaching both knowledge and technique in mental health and psychiatric nursing.

4) Taking care the students when unexpected events occur in the ward.

**Discussion**

As the results of the research study, most of the 3rd year nursing students had some knowledge and had a distorted view of psychiatric patients. In general, patients with psychosis have four significant disorders. They are the perceptions, thoughts, emotions, and behaviors. Also, students had negative attitudes towards psychiatric patients. They felt afraid of the patients who might behave aggressively and inflict self-harm.

The results were similar to other studies. Hemtanon, Norrasing, Hemtanon, & Kanchana (2000) found that around fifty-five percent of people in Pak Phun sub-district, Nakhon Si Thammarat province knew about mental disorders at a moderate level. Most of them
(92.7%) understood that the psychiatric patients had a labile mood. Their attitudes towards psychiatric patients were also at a moderate level ($X=2.84, SD = 26$). Chincharoensup, Supawadee, & Vittayanont (2014) and Taengbunngam, Chaiyapan, & Pitanupong, (2015) also found that the 6th year the medical students had low knowledge about mental disorders and attitudes towards psychiatric patients before visiting a community.

Nursing students also feared that they could not care or correctly treat patients. However, most of the students realized that it was the first and only experience to practice the subject in the psychiatric ward. Therefore they intended to maximize their skills and knowledge in mental health and psychiatric nursing through the help of teachers and staff in the ward.

**Suggestions**

The results of this research study could be used to develop a guideline for preparing students for pre-service training and to conduct teaching and learning activities in nursing practice. Correcting the distorted perception and negative attitudes towards psychiatric patients will help to reduce stigma in psychiatric patients.

**References**


