Evidence-Based Nursing: an introduction

"No man, not even a doctor, ever gives any other definition of what a nurse should be than this—devoted and obedient. This definition would do just as well for a porter. It might even do for a horse. It would not do for a policeman."—Florence Nightingale, 1860 (1)

Florence Nightingale would probably not recognise the nurse of today. As we move into the next millennium, we expect nurses to care with their hearts and minds; identify patients' actual and potential health problems; and develop research-based strategies to prevent, ameliorate, and comfort. We increasingly expect them to be empathic communicators who are also highly educated, critical thinkers abreast of all the important research findings.

Research makes a difference. In a meta-analysis designed to determine the contribution of research-based practice to patient outcomes, Heat and colleagues (2) reported that patients who receive research-based nursing care make "sizeable gains" in behavioural knowledge and in physiological and psychosocial outcomes compared with those receiving routine nursing care.

The process of incorporating good-quality research findings into nursing practice is, however, not straightforward. Bostrom and Suter (3) found that only 21% of 1200 practicing nurses had implemented a new research finding in the previous 6 months. Luker and Kenrick (4) used qualitative techniques in an exploratory study of community nurse decision making in the United Kingdom and determined that the nurses had an awareness of research but did not perceive it as informing their practice. This work also supported previous reports that nurses have difficulty in accessing and appraising published research, either because they do not have access to journals and libraries or because they have not been taught how to find and appraise research (5–7).

More than 400 nursing journals are listed in Ulrich's International Periodicals Directory (8), many of which publish original research in several languages. Nurses working individually cannot hope to find and read even the highest-quality research published each year, particularly when much of the research relevant to nursing is published in non-nursing journals.

Clinical nurses who have been taught how to identify and to critically appraise research respond with enthusiasm, but they have had difficulty applying these skills in practice, partly because of shifting patterns and workloads (9). In a qualitative study of nurses' information needs, those interviewed said that they needed accurate and concise reference sources. This is consistent with a survey of midwives working in northwestern England who reported great difficulty in assessing the quality of journal articles. These midwives asked for research reports to be more concise, free from jargon, and self-explanatory (10).

To meet these challenges, an evidence-based journal for nurses has been launched. Evidence-Based Nursing helps nurses by identifying and appraising high-quality, clinically relevant research and by publishing succinct, informative critical abstracts of each article together with commentaries from practicing nurses who can place the new research in context.

Evidence-Based Nursing will screen core journals and use established quality criteria to identify the best original articles and systematic reviews relating to the nursing role in the promotion of good health and the management of ill health. Robust research about all aspects of health care will be eligible for review, including that which addresses nursing education and the organisation and delivery of care. In addition to ensuring methodological rigour, we will strive to cover a broad range of clinical nursing specialties, such as primary care, pediatric nursing, mental health nursing, and midwifery. Nursing has a particularly rich tradition of qualitative research, which often seeks to address patient views and experiences, and Evidence-Based Nursing will ensure that the best qualitative research is reviewed and presented.

These are particularly exciting times in which to establish a journal of evidence-based nursing. Although medicine has a long history of research into the outcomes of medical care, we know much less about the outcomes of nursing care, and relatively little evaluative research has been done to distinguish between effective and ineffective nursing practice. This, however, is changing. Nurses in many parts of the world are trained to a graduate level and increasing numbers to a doctoral level. It is therefore probable that the volume and quality of nursing research will increase accordingly.

Another reason for excitement is the growing number of systematic reviews that deal with topics of interest to nurses. The scientific methods used in the production of systematic reviews are analogous to those of good-quality primary research; they address a clear question, use scientific methods to avoid the introduction of bias, and follow a systematic approach to appraise the quality of each piece of research they review. The increased availability of good-quality systematic reviews relating to health care is caused in large part by the genesis of the Cochrane Collaboration and the establishment of such centres as the NHS Centre for Reviews and Dissemination at the University of York in the United Kingdom. Both are concerned with health care in its broadest sense, and their databases contain many excellent systematic reviews of immediate importance to nursing. Evidence-Based Nursing is eager to review these and other systematic reviews as they become available.

The identification of research
worthy of implementation is only one part of the process of evidence-based health care. The contexts in which health care is delivered, with myriad individual and organisational factors, ensure that implementation is not automatic. Evidence-Based Nursing includes an “Implementation Forum,” which publishes short papers that describe the process and results of the implementation of an evidence-based nursing intervention.

We hope that Evidence-Based Nursing will make a major contribution to nursing, and ultimately to patient care, by bringing the findings of rigorous research to the attention of nurses, by promoting the critical appraisal of research, and by fostering implementation.

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References

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