

# Nurses' Knowledge of their Legal Responsibilities towards Patient Care

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Nursing is an integral part of the health care system and nurses direct their energies towards the promotion, maintenance and restoration of health. The role of nurses has expanded rapidly within the past ten years to include expertise specialisation, autonomy and accountability. With the advent of the Consumer Protection Act of 1986, all professionals, i.e. medical, architects, solicitors, chartered accountants, nurses etc. have come within the purview of the Act. The impact of health care consumer movement has been to promote increased accountability on the part of all health professionals including nurses.

When professional liability is recognised, it defines the parameters of the profession and the standards of professional conduct. Nurses should therefore enhance their professional and legal knowledge. The patient is considered the consumer of nursing and health care. Thus, the nurses who are in the clinical area need to be aware of the patients' rights and nurses' responsibility towards them.

A quasi-experimental study was carried out to evaluate the effectiveness of an information booklet on the knowledge of nurses related to the legal responsibilities in patient care in selected hospitals of Pune, Maharashtra.

## Objectives

The objectives of the study were:

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- ♦ To assess the level of knowledge of nurses regarding legal responsibilities in patient care.
- ♦ To determine the relationship between knowledge and selected demographic variables.
- ♦ To develop information booklet regarding the legal responsibilities in patient care.
- ♦ To assess knowledge of nurses regarding legal responsibilities in patient care after administration of an information booklet.
- ♦ To ascertain the opinion of nurses about the information booklet in terms of its acceptability.

## Methodology

The conceptual framework used for the study was based on the general systems model. A knowledge assessment questionnaire was developed consisting of 30 multiple-choice questions categorized under the following broad areas:

- ♦ Legal terms
- ♦ Admission and discharge
- ♦ Safety and responsibility
- ♦ Acts and negligence
- ♦ Consent and MLC
- ♦ Clients' rights
- ♦ Documentation and emergency
- ♦ Safeguarding and interpersonal relationship

The tool was found to be reliable ( $r=0.8$ ). A structured questionnaire was used to ascertain the opinion of nurses about the information booklet in terms of its acceptability.

A single group pretest post test design was used on 50 staff nurses who met the sampling criteria, selected by convenience sampling technique.

The study was carried out in II phases. In phase I, the pretest knowledge was collected and the booklet was distributed. In phase II, the post test was conducted after an interval of 7-9 days. An opinionnaire was administered to collect data on the acceptability of the information booklet on the same day of the post test.

## Findings and Discussion

The data was analysed using descriptive and inferential statistics. The major findings of the study showed that 88% of the participants were female, 74% of them belonged to the age group of 20-25, 50% were graduates and 50% were diploma holders. 70% of them did not attend any in-service education regarding legal responsibilities of nurses.

The pretest knowledge scores in each category was Legal terms (mean score 3.24/7), admission and discharge (mean score 2.28/5), safety and responsibility (mean score 3.9/7), acts and negligence (mean score 4.56/7) consent and medico-legal case (mean score 1.4/4), clients' rights (mean score 2.96/4), documentation and emergency (mean score 2.24/3) and safeguarding and interpersonal relationship (mean score 1.88/3).

The relationship of selected variables showed that there is no significant association be-



tween nurses' knowledge and the gender, age, length of clinical experience, area of present posting, in-service education. There was a significant association between the level of pre-test knowledge of the staff nurses and their professional qualification ( $p < 0.05$ ) i.e. the graduate nurses scored better than diploma nurses. This may be due to the fact that in the graduate curriculum the legal and ethical aspects of nursing are more stressed upon.

It was found that after the introduction of information booklet, there was a highly significant ( $p < 0.01$ ) increase in the knowledge of the subjects in all areas of legal responsibilities of nurses related to patient care. The findings on the opinionnaire indicate that 86% of the nurses believed that the information booklet was a good source of learning. 98% of the samples believed that the booklet should be made available to all the staff nurses.

This study had implications in nursing practice, administration, education and research. It implied that all nursing personnel be provided with a copy of information booklet that may help them for independent learning to improve their knowledge regarding legal responsibilities in patient care and integrate it into their practice. The information booklet will also serve as a ready reference in case there is any disparity between the nurse, patient and the management.

A copy of the information booklet may be provided to staff nurses during orientation programme. This shall ensure better professional standards of nursing. Moreover nurses who are knowledgeable about their legal responsibilities will be able

to act as a patient's advocate and also help in saving a lot of hospital management's time and money which may arise due to consumers suing the hospital due to nurse's negligence.

#### Recommendations

- ♦ A similar study may be replicated with a control group and on a larger sample.
- ♦ Studies may be conducted to evaluate the effectiveness of an information booklet versus other methods of teaching on legal responsibilities of nurses regarding patient care.
- ♦ A study can be conducted to see the improvement in practice of nurses in relation to the knowledge of legal responsibilities in patient care.
- ♦ A study to determine the incidences of malpractice suits against nurses and the effect of these in their practice.
- ♦ A study to assess the knowledge of patients regarding their rights.
- ♦ A study can be conducted to assess the attitude of patients in relation to the legal responsibilities of nurses.

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