Changing the Way We Teach Health Assessment

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Assessment is the first step in the nursing process and an essential skill for all nurses. According to the American Nurses Association Scope and Standards of Practice, Third Edition, assessment includes the use of evidence-based techniques and tools designed to collect relevant information or data for identifying patterns and variations regarding a patient's health condition (American Nurses Association, 2015). The ANA has mandated that assessment is a systematic, ongoing process to be conducted at regular intervals by nurses. Yet a search of PubMed, CINAHL, and Google Scholar using search terms "nurses and physical assessment," "nursing students and physical assessment," "assessment techniques," and "assessment skills from 2005 to the present" produced no evidence on the specific techniques, tools, skills or content necessary to be included in a prelicensure health assessment course.

The National Council of State Boards of Nursing Model Act for all states contains the following statements regarding the comprehensive and focused nursing assessment for registered nurses (RN) and licensed practical/vocational nurses (LPN/LVN): "Comprehensive nursing assessment means collection, analysis and synthesis of data performed by an RN used to establish a health status baseline, plan care and address changes in a patient's condition" (National Council of State Boards of Nursing, 2012, p. 1).

Focused nursing assessment means recognizing patient characteristics by an LPN/LVN that may affect the patient's health status, gathering and recording assessment data and demonstrating attentiveness by observing, monitoring, and reporting signs, symptoms, and changes in patient condition in an ongoing manner to the supervising registered nurse.

The North Carolina Nursing Practice Act describes assessment as the first component of practice for both the RN and the LPN/LVN (1981). Clearly, assessment is important to the care of patients. Although evidence reflects the connection between quality RN patient care and optimal patient outcomes (Lucero, Lake, & Aiken, 2010; Recio-Saucedo et al., 2018), there is little evidence to support the direct connection between a thorough nursing assessment to improved patient outcomes (Giddens, 2007; Zambas, 2010).

Determining Commonly Used Assessment Skills

Morell et al. (2019), conducted a scoping review of the literature to identify studies published between 2008 to 2018 that focused on health assessment skills being taught in nursing education programs and clinical practice settings. Articles selected for the review included experimental and quasi-experimental designs that used randomized and nonrandomized controlled trials with prospective and retrospective groups. Descriptive observational designs, cross-sectional studies, case reports, and qualitative studies were also included in the review. A search of PubMed and CINAHL was conducted by two independent reviewers, which resulted in 43 articles that related

to the topic of interest. The authors found a paucity of evidence and lack of consensus regarding specific content and health assessment skills that should be taught in prelicensure nursing courses to adequately prepare students for nursing practice. This lack of evidence may subsequently result in faculty deciding which content and skills need to be taught (Morell et al., 2019).

The authors further concluded that the opportunity to practice and master a skill in nursing school is necessary for practical application by the nurse. Additionally, decreasing the number of assessment skills being taught allows time to emphasize the importance of interpreting health assessment findings and determining next steps to make clinical decisions, which will likely decrease the risk of failure to rescue (Morell et al., 2019).

Textbooks currently being used in higher education contain information that is often obsolete and outdated or is not read by students, and are quite costly (Parker, 2019). This makes it difficult for students and faculty alike to prepare for the realities of practice. Many of the assessment skills taught in prelicensure nursing programs are rarely performed by nurses outside of a specialty area such as using an ophthalmoscope to assess the internal eye (Giddens & Eddy, 2009). This creates a disconnect between the content and skills taught in nursing school and those commonly used in nursing practice (Giddens, 2007; Zambas, 2010).

Zambas (2010) discussed a study that compared the 120 skills taught in an undergraduate program with those used by nurses in practice. Of the 120 skills included in the study, only 29% were used during each shift or at least weekly, and 37% of the skills were never used. From 126 skills identified in a nursing textbook, only 30 were identified as nursing skills performed on a routine basis (Zambas, 2010). The assessment skills routinely used included inspection and palpation along with auscultation of heart, lung, and bowel sounds (Giddens, 2007; Zambas, 2010). According to Anderson, Nix, Norman, and McPike (2014), a total of 71 (56%) assessment competencies that were infrequently performed were deemed as nonessential when teaching in a prelicensure health assessment course. Our review of the literature provided little information concerning the necessary assessment skills required for direct patient care, nor was there information on which assessment skills should be eliminated from a health assessment course. Giddens (2007) found that only 30 out of 126 assessment skills regarding health assessment are routinely used by nurses in the clinical setting. From Gidden's first study in 2007 to Anderson et al.'s study (2014), little to no change has taken place even though both studies reported that only about 30% of all the skills taught to undergraduate nursing students are actually used in the clinical setting.

Kohtz, Brown, Williams, and O'Connor (2017) replicated Giddens' (2007) initial study that focused on identifying the assessment skills most commonly used in general nursing practice. The outcome of the study was similar to that of Giddens' original work. Kohtz et al. (2017) found that 21 of 126 (17%) assessment skills had a median score of 5 indicating that they were routinely performed regularly during each shift. An additional 9 skills had a median score of 4 indicating they were performed frequently, every 2 to 5 shifts. The top 30 skills with a median of 4 or 5 are outlined in Table 1 (next page).

TABLE 1

Health Assessment Skills with a Median of Four or Five

Health Assessment Skill	Median	Health Assessment Skill	Median	Health Assessment Skill	Median
Auscultate breath sounds	5	Inspect skin color of extremities	5	Evaluate face for movement and sensation	5
Auscultate bowel sounds	5	Evaluate speech	5	Inspect chest shape	4
Auscultate heart sounds	5	Inspect skin lesions	5	Assess hearing based on conversation	4
Inspect/palpate extremities for edema	5	Assess level of consciousness	5	Inspect muscle size and symmetry	4
Inspect abdomen	5	Palpate abdomen for tenderness or distension	5	Assess gait	4
Palpate extremities for temperature	5	Palpate extremities for tenderness	5	Inspect oral cavity	4
Assess capillary refill	5	Inspect external eyes	5	Inspect thorax for lifts	4
Palpate distal pulses	5	Inspect wounds	5	Palpate abdomen for masses	4
Evaluate breathing effort	5	Assess PERRLA	5	Observe range of motion of joints	4
Inspect overall skin color	5	Assess muscle strength	5	Inspect facial structures	4

Source: Kohtz et al., 2017.

The research conducted by Giddens (2007), Zambas (2010) Anderson (2014), and Kohtz et al. (2017) identified the top assessment skills being performed daily or weekly. Those skills required using necessary assessment techniques of inspection, auscultation, and palpation.

Articles found during our review of literature demonstrated that researchers were focused on identifying the most commonly used assessment skills in clinical practice. There was no specific guide on how to determine which assessment skills should be included or excluded in a health assessment course in a prelicensure nursing program. Two studies provided suggestions for nurse educators to consider guiding their selection of commonly used skills to include in an assessment course; for example, (a) include skills that have been ranked by respondents to be regularly or frequently performed either daily or weekly in clinical practice, and (b) reexamine the need to include skills that are infrequently used or used in specialty areas outside of general nursing practice (Giddens & Eddy, 2009; Kohtz et al., 2017).

Summary

Nurse educators must determine the necessary assessment skills to be taught in prelicensure nursing education programs and consider the acquisition of essential assessment skills that lead to optimal patient outcomes (Kohtz et al., 2017). However, there is little to no research that supports the decisions nurse educators are making regarding the essential health assessment components needed for comprehensive evaluation of any patient or which assessment skills can be omitted from the curriculum. Eliminating nonessential assessment skills from the course could allow students to spend more time focusing on the essential assessment skills that are required to safely care for patients in the various settings of nurses' work. Using essential assessment skills when encountering or caring for a patient improves the nurse's ability to observe and recognize subtle cues, interpret or gather additional information or data, and respond to the patient's health care needs (Zambas, Smythe, & Koziol-McLain, 2016).

Based on findings from recent studies (Morell et al.,2019)), essential nursing assessment techniques include inspection, auscultation, and palpation. Research conducted by Giddens (2007), Anderson (2014), & Kohtz et al. (2017) has identified the most commonly performed assessment skills used in clinical practice. However, we still do not know how patient outcomes are impacted if nursing students are only taught the commonly used assessment skills in nursing school. As educators, we must work with our clinical practice partners to change what is taught to students regarding how to perform health assessments in order to equip them with the skills necessary to provide quality patient care. Additional research is needed to measure patient outcomes when limited assessment skills are being taught in nursing school (Zambas, 2010).

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