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THE USE OF BASIC WRITING SKILLS

BY

SENIOR NURSING STUDENTS

AN ABSTRACT OF

A THESIS

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Abstract

Many students who enter institutions of higher learning are insufficiently prepared academically to be there. The decline in scores on College Board Scholastic Aptitude Tests attests to this. It is reasonable to assume that some nursing students are among those lacking proficiency in basic academic skills. Since a primary function of professional nurses is communication, and written communication is vital to planning and continuity of patient care, unacceptable written documentation by professional nurses fails to fulfill its purposes and reflects negatively on the profession. The purpose of this study was to determine if senior nursing students possess the basic writing skills necessary to perform acceptably the writing tasks required of professional nurses.

The written documentation of senior generic nursing students within six months of graduation from one baccalaureate nursing program was examined. Because the documentation task did not change substantially after a pilot study, data from the pilot study were included with main study data. Student volunteers were shown two video taped nurse-patient interactions. After viewing each interaction, students documented the interaction in a nursing progress note exactly as they would if they were the nurse in the video tape.

The writing samples were transcribed verbatim by the researcher into a computer using the AppleWorks word processing program. Each sample of documentation was then evaluated for grammar and spelling using the Sensible Grammar and The Sensible Speller, including Stedman's Medical Dictionary program supplement, computer programs developed for and available from Sensible Software, Inc. Medical terminology, abbreviations, and/or other data not analyzed by these programs were judged according to appropriate reference texts. An additional source of errors identified by the researcher was penmanship, which included words with poorly formed or incomplete letters and words with inappropriately mixed upper- and lower-case letters. Scores for spelling, grammar, penmanship, and their combination, writing, were determined for each volunteer on each of two samples of documentation and on the combination of the two samples. Scores were determined by subtracting the number of errors identified from the number of words in the sample being evaluated and dividing that number by the number of words in the sample.

Only 54% of participants achieved scores considered acceptable in spelling; 64% achieved acceptable scores in grammar; 68% achieved acceptable penmanship scores; and, only 7% achieved writing scores considered acceptable for professional nurses. Mean scores fell below the acceptable level for professional nurses in documenting nurse-patient interactions in spelling, grammar, penmanship, and writing.

Because this study found that senior nursing students do not possess the basic writing skills necessary to perform acceptably the writing tasks required of professional nurses, nurse educators need to begin to perceive writing as integral to professional nursing and should assign writing tasks in order to correct and shape the writing skills of students. Schools of nursing might consider requiring seniors to pass a writing proficiency test as a requirement for graduation. To confirm study findings, this study should be replicated with a larger sample representing a variety of nursing education programs.