

DEVELOPMENT OF EXPERTISE IN NURSING: WHY AND HOW

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Nursing is an extremely important workforce in the health domain worldwide. In Brazil, the nursing workforce includes approximately 1,500,000 workers, of whom about 270,000 are nurses. As most of this quota works for the Brazilian National Health System, we can conclude that the health care of the population must pass through the hands of nurses and of the nursing team coordinated by nurses. This undeniable fact points to the need for the development of professional competencies for nurses so that they can adequately respond to the health needs of the population. Those skills require the acquisition of complex knowledge considering the context where technological development, changes in the demographic profile (with a growing number of elderly) and a concomitant increase in the prevalence of chronic diseases lead to a greater complexity of health-illness conditions and greater severity of acute cases. Profound social and value changes influence the forms of relationship with each other and add to the complexity of any health related situation. Thus, how to prepare competent nurses to accomplish this important mission becomes a challenge.

Patricia Benner*, a contemporary nursing theorist, proposes a theoretical model on the passage from novice to expert through five levels: novice, beginner, competent, proficient and expert. The evolution through successive levels is based on the successful acquisition of the previous one, from which abstract principles are refined and expanded by the contact with a variety of clinical situations, resulting in the passage to a higher level. In this model, the progression through the levels of proficiency mirrors the development of clinical knowledge and supports career development in the area of clinical nursing. The theorist also argues that the progression to expertise is based on a sound educational base with the addition of a multitude of clinical experiences. In fact, for Benner, expertise without experience is impossible. Thus, it seems reasonable to suggest that the development of knowledge in health-related disciplines such as nursing could result from what constitutes the clinical experience of expert nurses, to which clinical research could contribute significantly.

In this scene, a strong partnership between academia and clinical practice is fundamental to facilitate the evolution of clinical experience by allowing the symbiosis between types of knowledge such as “know that” and “know-how”. Practice immersion is crucial to nourish and to guide acquisition of knowledge during the training at both undergraduate and graduate levels. On the other hand, research produces new knowledge that could, potentially, influence practice significantly. Consequently, research must be close to practice – coming from and returning to practice by an extensive use of scientific evidence in the everyday clinical practice and all activities of continuing education.

The habit of reflection on the clinical situations experienced, as well as on the gap between the expected and observed results obtained in response to nursing interventions, can significantly contribute to the clinical maturity of the nurse. As this reflection must be backed up by scientific evidence, nurses in clinical practice should be pushed towards a profile of a consumer of scientific literature, as well as collaborators in the production of scientific knowledge. This ensures the fine-tuning of their knowledge, as well as legitimating nursing research, placing its results to leverage the quality of health care provided to the patient, family and community.

Familiarity with the research should begin at the undergraduate level. In this sense, the Brazilian context is extremely privileged by the undeniable development of research among the undergraduate students, through the incentive for the scientific initiation. Students should be encouraged to produce more and more research and to use data from the produced knowledge in clinical practice, while appropriate strategies are adopted to guarantee significant clinical experiences able to induce the development of clinical judgment and implementation of effective nursing interventions. Well-prepared students skilled to work in accordance with the expected expertise for their level are more likely to continue evolving in their professional career, contributing to the advancement of the profession and therefore ensuring quality of nursing care for the population.

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*Benner P. From novice to expert. *AJN*. 1982;82(3):402-7.