An international survey of the educational activities of schools of nursing on psychoactive drugs

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A survey of the educational activities of schools of nursing on psychoactive drugs in 99 countries was carried out. All the schools that replied gave specific teaching and many also included the rational use of these drugs. The amount of time devoted to this teaching and the methods used varied greatly. Most schools felt that this topic needed more emphasis and many agreed that guidelines on teaching methods and approaches, as well as broad teaching aims and objectives, would be useful.

Introduction

The introduction of the tricyclic antidepressants in the 1950s marked the beginning of an era in which the use of psychoactive drugs prescribed by doctors increased greatly. Although the efficacy of many of these drugs in specific conditions had been well shown, concern began to be expressed over their widespread use (1) and abuse in the early 1970s. This concern has grown with knowledge of the risk of dependence (2) and with the inappropriate use of these drugs to treat personal and social problems (3) or physical disorders (4). The importance of promoting the rational use of psychoactive drugs and the need to educate health care professionals in this area has been recognized by WHO (8).

As little information was available on the amount of education schools of nursing were providing on the rational use of psychoactive drugs, it was decided to carry out a global survey of these schools. The results are reported here.

Method

A questionnaire was constructed to examine the amount of teaching given on psychoactive drugs and the stage when this occurred, the methods used, the departments responsible, and whether there were formal tests of the students’ knowledge. Data were also gathered on the teaching on rational prescribing, drug dependency, alcohol and related topics. The schools were asked to provide this information as applied to nurses undergoing general training and to those who were training as psychiatric or mental health nurses separately. Schools were asked for their views on these topics and what they felt the role of WHO should be in these areas. The questionnaire (in English) was sent to all schools of nursing in the United Kingdom and to 254 schools in 98 other countries. In countries with five or fewer schools of nursing, they were all sent questionnaires; where there were more than five schools, five were randomly selected.

Results

The schools of nursing were grouped into geographical regions for the analysis of results. From the schools that sent questionnaires there were 60 replies from 173 (35%) in the United Kingdom and 43 from 254 (17%) in other countries.

In the United Kingdom 39 schools provided specific courses on psychoactive drugs for mental health nurses; the teaching given to general nurses and mental health nurses therefore varied greatly and is therefore recorded separately. In the other countries, as only 4 of the schools that replied had specific courses for mental health nurses, the results for general and mental health nurses are not separated.

Amount of teaching on psychoactive drugs

All the nursing schools that replied had courses on psychoactive drugs. In the United Kingdom general nurses received a mean of 4.6 hours of instruction and psychiatric nurses received a mean of 13.9 hours (Table 1). The majority of this teaching was given by nurses, while doctors and pharmacists contributed in some schools.

Psychoactive drugs were taught as a separate subject to 85% of the general and 70% of the psychiatric nurses in the United Kingdom and to 60% of nurses in other countries. A variety of teaching methods were used including lectures, tutorials and seminars. There were no marked regional patterns in the methods used.

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Table 1: Teaching on psychoactive drugs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>No. of hours</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>Range</td>
<td>S.D.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United Kingdom:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General nurses</td>
<td>4.6</td>
<td>0.5–26</td>
<td>5.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mental health nurses</td>
<td>13.9</td>
<td>2–56</td>
<td>13.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other countries: nurses</td>
<td>10.1</td>
<td>1–56</td>
<td>10.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Changes in the teaching on psychoactive drugs

In the United Kingdom, 23% of the schools of nursing had increased the amount of teaching they gave to general nurses on psychoactive drugs by an average of 2.4 hours (range, 1–8 hours; SD = 2.2). While another 7% of schools had plans to increase, none had decreased or was planning to decrease the amount of teaching. More significant were the changes in the teaching on psychoactive drugs to mental health nurses in the United Kingdom in the last 5 years; while 36% of schools had increased their teaching by an average of 7 hours, 8% had reduced by an average of 4 hours. In other countries, 34% of schools increased the amount of teaching they gave (mean, 10.3 hours; range, 1–40 hours; SD = 14.75) and 16% were planning to increase by an average of 4 hours.

Teaching on alcohol-related disorders and drug dependence

In the United Kingdom, 85% of the general nurses received teaching on alcohol-related disorders for an average of 4.3 hours, and all the mental health nurses received an average of 14.1 hours (Table 2). In other countries, teaching was given for an average of 6.8 hours (Table 2); a number of schools in Muslim countries pointed out that, as alcohol was not allowed, they did not teach alcohol-related disorders. In the United Kingdom, 90% of the general nursing students received teaching on drug dependence for an average of 3.7 hours, while all mental health nurses received an average of 12.4 hours of instruction; 85% of the nurses in other countries received an average of 3.2 hours (Table 3).

Teaching on related topics

The majority of schools of nursing also gave instruction on related topics such as counselling, alternatives to psychoactive drugs, and psychological aspects of disease. It was not possible to quantify the amount of teaching given on the psychological aspects of disease since most schools reported that this was integrated throughout the course.

It was also impossible to identify the amount of teaching given to mental health nurses in the United Kingdom on the alternatives to psychoactive drug usage because many schools reported that the whole or a large part of their course was devoted to this. General nurses received an average of 7.5 hours instruction on this topic in the United Kingdom (mean, 7.4 hours; range, 2–40 hours) while nurses in other countries received an average of 20.1 hours (mean, 27.9 hours; range, 2–44 hours). Counselling was taught in all the schools in the United Kingdom to general nurses for an average of 17.1 hours (mean, 14.4 hours; range, 3–60 hours) and to mental health nurses for an average of 113 hours (mean, 91 hours; range, 6–600 hours). In other countries, 82% of nurses received teaching on counselling for an average of 36.8 hours (mean, 68 hours; range, 6–264 hours).

Views on psychoactive drugs and related topics

Overall, 49% of nursing schools in the United Kingdom and 74% of those in other countries agreed or strongly agreed that there should be more teaching on the rational use of psychoactive drugs. A considerable number of schools felt that broad teaching aims and objectives would be useful (66% in the United Kingdom and 74% in other countries) and that guidance on teaching methods and approaches would also be helpful (54% in the United Kingdom and 67% in other countries). It was thought that such guidance would carry more weight if it came from WHO (43% in the United Kingdom and 56% in other countries). They also believed that there should
be increases in the teaching on mental health (United Kingdom, 89%; other countries, 92%), alcohol-related disorders (United Kingdom, 75%; other countries 88%), and drug dependence (United Kingdom, 78%; other countries 70%). Overall, 83% and 70% of schools in the United Kingdom and other countries, respectively, agreed or strongly agreed that they should take note of advice on this matter from WHO.

In 29% of schools in the United Kingdom and 40% in other countries the teaching was left to individuals: 5% in the United Kingdom and 63% in other countries said they would be willing to take an initiative in this area.

Discussion
The 30% response rate in this survey is disappointing and is less than the rate for similar surveys of schools of pharmacy (5) and medical schools in the United Kingdom (6). However, the nursing schools were sent questionnaires only once in English, and the results of the current survey provided the only available data on teaching given to nurses on psychoactive drugs. It was apparent from the survey that the role nurses play in health care provision varies greatly between countries. In some countries nurses can only dispense or administer psychoactive drugs under medical direction, while in other countries they are allowed to prescribe. Thus, it is essential that nurses should receive adequate teaching on psychoactive drugs, including their rational use, and on alternative treatments. It is not surprising that both the duration of the nurses’ courses and the time devoted to psychoactive drugs vary greatly, mental health nurses in particular receiving a great deal of teaching in this area.

It is encouraging that all the schools of nursing taught this subject, and many had increased or were planning to increase this teaching. The amount of time devoted to psychoactive drugs and rational prescribing compares favourably with the time spent on alcohol-related disorders and drug dependence, and is similar to that given in medical schools in the United Kingdom. However, schools of pharmacy devote considerably more time to this subject (5), and as recent surveys have shown that 10% of American adults report recent use of a psychoactive drug (7), it is apparent that there is a need for far more emphasis on this subject. Most schools gave teaching on related topics and a number criticized our survey because it focused on the amount of formal teaching given. They felt that it was difficult to separate the components of an integrated course and argued that much valuable teaching was given on an informal basis. Although this is undoubtedly true, it is important to ensure that all students receive adequate formal teaching in this subject because it may not otherwise be given.

Overall, the schools felt that psychoactive drugs and their rational use were important, and most would be grateful for guidelines on these topics and would take notice of advice from WHO.

Résumé
Une enquête internationale sur les activités d’éducation des écoles d’infirmières concernant les psychotropes
Des inquiétudes persistent en ce qui concerne l’usage très répandu des psychotropes, et il est de plus en plus admis qu’il est important d’éduquer les professionnels des soins de santé en ce qui concerne l’utilisation rationnelle de ces médicaments. Une enquête a été effectuée dans toutes les écoles d’infirmières de Grande-Bretagne et dans 250 écoles d’infirmières de 98 autres pays par l’intermédiaire d’un questionnaire sur l’enseignement donné sur les psychotropes et sur leur emploi rationnel. Il était également demandé aux écoles de fournir des informations sur l’enseignement donné sur les sujets en question. Il est regrettable que des réponses n’aient été reçues que de 30% des écoles où un enseignement sur les psychotropes était donné pendant une moyenne de 10,1 heures, principalement par des infirmières et surtout sous forme de leçons et de travaux pratiques. Un certain nombre d’écoles ont développé leur enseignement sur ce sujet dans les cinq dernières années, et un tiers d’entre elles prévoient de le faire. La majorité des infirmières recevaient également un enseignement sur les affections liées à l’alcool et sur la toxicomanie, et le temps consacré aux psychotropes se comparait favorablement à celui consacré à ces sujets. Le soutien psychologique était enseigné dans 85% des écoles d’infirmières, et dans beaucoup d’entre elles, les traitements de remplacement étaient également au programme.

Toutes les écoles pensaient que les psychotropes et leur emploi rationnel étaient des sujets importants et la majorité considérait qu’elles devraient faire plus dans ces domaines. Beaucoup estimaient qu’il serait utile d’avoir des buts et des objectifs d’enseignement assez larges et croyaient que de telles directives auraient plus de poids si elles venaient de l’OMS.

References


