



“Speaking of sexuality”: Enhancing comfort and confidence among nurses caring for older patients

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ABSTRACT

Human sexuality, a fundamental aspect of overall health and well-being, persists throughout all stages of the human lifecycle, including advanced age. Research demonstrates that a significant number of older adults maintain interest in sexual activity and continue to be sexually active during their later years. Nurses and healthcare providers must learn to understand the intricate interplay of psychological and physical influences leading to sexual difficulties among older individuals. Such knowledge is critical when providing effective assistance to older adults grappling with sexuality-related concerns. Given that the over 65 population accesses healthcare services frequently, healthcare professionals serve as pivotal intermediaries in addressing sexual issues. Nevertheless, medical personnel often feel uncomfortable and unsure about initiating conversations about sexuality among this population. This paper explores the reasons underlying the common tendency among healthcare professionals to avoid such discussions and suggests strategies to ameliorate this situation.

Keywords: sexuality; nurses; aging; older adults; older patients

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Sexuality is a critical element of overall health and emotional wellness that persists across all stages of the human lifecycle, including advanced age (Ayalon et al., 2019, 2021). Nevertheless, despite the importance of sexuality and the observable shifts in sexual function during this stage of life, nursing professionals have a deficit of knowledge with respect to the dialogue and strategies they should adopt when addressing sexuality in older adults (Fennell, & Grant, 2019; Levkovich et al, 2018, 2021). While factors such as depression and anxiety can affect sexual performance at all ages, the prevalence of these factors tends to increase as individuals age. Moreover, various life events, physical and emotional states and disease prevalence may also affect sexual function in older adults (Ayalon et al., 2019).

Research shows that older adults expect healthcare providers and physicians to address their sexual health concerns

(Levkovich et al., 2018, 2019). Yet consultations about sexual issues often elicit responses that are derisive or dismissive (Ayalon et al., 2019, 2021), and this trend escalates as patients age. Among nurses, barriers to such discussions include time constraints, inadequate communication skills, lack of confidence, and a preference for avoiding such topics (Fennell, & Grant, 2019; Levkovich et al., 2018). Further, healthcare professionals tend to believe that issues pertaining to sexuality in old age are beyond their professional competence (Gewirtz-Meydan et al., 2019; Levkovich et al., 2018) or that they lack the requisite knowledge to handle such matters (Fennell, & Grant, 2019; Gewirtz-Meydan et al., 2022). In instances when healthcare professionals do converse about sexuality with older adults, the discussions typically revolve around symptoms, prevalence, medication, and other health conditions potentially related to the sexual issues (Levkovich et al., 2018, 2019).

Numerous studies have accentuated the advantages patients would gain if nursing staff members were provided comprehensive training on matters related to sexual healthcare (Fennell, & Grant, 2019; Yingling et al., 2017). Nurses who have received formal instruction on effective communication of sexual health information are more proactive in addressing patients' sexual health concerns, as opposed to merely reacting to them (Aguilar, 2017; Sung et al., 2016; Thys et al., 2019). Consequently, initiating dialogues on sexuality with patients can also translate into cost effectiveness derived from treating associated infections and diseases (Fennell, & Grant, 2019; Sung et al., 2016; Yingling et al., 2017). Patients have expressed a desire for trustworthy and unbiased care as well as for education about sexual health (Ayalon et al., 2019, 2021).

Training programs for nurses are needed. These programs should address knowledge, attitudes, beliefs, and comfort levels and include modules that provide opportunities for role-playing of sexual health conversations (Aguilar, 2017). Offering nurses professional development and continuing education programs on sexual healthcare education is imperative. Despite the call for standardized curricula in sexual healthcare, uncertainties persist regarding content and mode of delivery. Incorporating sexual health education into nursing practice has the potential to bolster comprehensive nursing care. Indeed,

incorporating human sexuality into nursing curricula would underline the significance of sexual issues and equip nurses with the skills and knowledge to do their jobs efficiently in this domain.

Declaration of Interest

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Data Availability

None

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