Implementing an 'arts in nursing' program on a medical-surgical unit

Professional Issues

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The idea of incorporating arts into patient care seems to have begun in 1990 when Mary Rockwood Lane, PhD, RN, and John Graham-Pole, MD, helped create and implement the Arts in Medicine (AIM) program at Shands Hospital at the University of Florida (Lane & Graham-Pole, 1994). Their program incorporated artistic materials and activities into patient care. The program started on the bone marrow transplant unit in 1993, with a goal of reducing morbidity, and improving recovery time, mood, behavior, and quality of life for children and teens during their admission to the hospital. Due to its success, this endeavor has grown into a world-renowned program. As the publicity regarding this successful program grew, other hospitals and patient care programs implemented their own AIM initiatives.

These programs tend to include artists, volunteers, and staff who interact with patients at the bedside, employing a broad spectrum of art forms to effect healing. These include visual art, music, dance, storytelling, and acting among others.

After learning of the success of these arts programs, a nurse researcher and a clinical education specialist from a Midwestern hospital wanted to implement a similar program in their institution. The groundwork was laid for a small pilot program that would be limited to one patient care unit, and one population of patients within that unit. Hospitalized adult patients with chronic renal disease were chosen to participate because they experience frequent admissions to the hospital and tend to suffer both fatigue and depression. The choice of this patient population was supported further by the successful results of an observational study of an AIM program in an outpatient hemodialysis unit (Ross, Hollen, & Fitzgerald, 2006). The support of the nurse manager of the inpatient renal unit and the chief nurse executive was key to program implementation. Approval was obtained from the hospital's institutional review board. A small amount of funding ($1,000) was obtained to begin a new program entitled "Arts in Nursing." The purpose of the program was to create opportunities for encouraging patients' artistic expression that can act as a therapeutic bridge to healing or acceptance of their health conditions. The goal of the pilot program was to explore outcomes that result from incorporation of arts into patient care for a group of patients with chronic renal disease.

An artist who also was licensed as an art therapist was retained to begin working with patients during the program pilot. Funding allowed 40 hours of artist...
time. A rolling art cart and art supplies were purchased through donations. Nursing staff on the pilot unit were educated about the program. A question-and-answer sheet regarding the program was developed to address common questions from the nursing staff. An informational document was developed to inform patients about the program. Signs also were posted to remind nursing staff about the pilot program. Each weekday morning, nurses and nursing assistants identified patients they believed would benefit from an artist visit. Patients were asked if they would like to participate, making it clear there was no charge for the visit and their care would not be affected by their choice. The charge nurse recorded all requests in a notebook at the nurses' station and contacted the artist, who arranged visits to the patients who wanted to participate.

The pilot program began February 15, 2010, and was completed by April 14, 2010. The artist completed 36 visits to 11 patients. Although the nurses were educated about the program and supported it, they sometimes forgot to identify patients who would benefit from the program. During the pilot phase, the clinical education specialist would visit the unit to assist the nurses in identifying potential patients for program involvement. She then contacted the artist to arrange a visit. Typically, the artist would see two to four patients up to three times a week. Each visit averaged about an hour. The artist facilitated patients' involvement in painting, drawing, completing a collage, or working with clay. Materials were kept on a rolling art cart that was wheeled between patient rooms. Patients and the artist were required to wash their hands before working with any of the art materials, and the cart was kept away from patients' beds.

Many of the patients had experienced numerous health challenges and some had lost the ability to perform simple functions, such as walking. Some appeared depressed, fatigued, and in pain. When approached with the question, "Would you like to do art?" patients typically responded, "I can't even draw a stick person." Once patients were assured the service was about freedom of self-expression, coping with emotions, and just having fun, their concerns seemed to dissipate. Patients indicated the time went by more quickly when they were engaged in art activities. The artist saw patients express a variety of emotions through the art they created. Family members commented on program benefits for their loved ones, and some indicated they planned to purchase art supplies for use at home (see Figure 1).

FIGURE 1.

Comments from Participants in the "Arts in Nursing" Program

Observations by Patients

"This is so very nice, keeps my mind off the worries about my surgery."

"It brings memories back and keeps my mind stronger."

"It lets my mind focus on something else."

"Really helps pass the time when you're just here in the hospital."

"I can't believe how fast the time passes by [when doing art]."

"This is fun, I'm going to keep doing this when I get home."

"I enjoy painting when you [the artist] visit."

"I love working with clay--it makes the hospital visit less boring."

Observations by Nursing Staff and the Artist
"The patients seem to have a brighter affect when painting."

"Patients seem happier."

"It really seemed to help our patients."

"It gives them something to think about besides their disease process."

"We've had to tell a few people it's time to put their drawings away and go to sleep. The time just gets away from them and they get really excited about it."

"It's really great when the patients' families also participate."

Nursing Implications

Giving patients an opportunity to express themselves artistically may lead to benefits for patients with a variety of other medical conditions. Nurses wishing to begin a similar program will need to identify the specific patient population with which they wish to work. Locating a source of funding for the art supplies and artist time is essential. Community arts education programs or councils, local colleges and universities, or art teachers at local schools may be a source of artists interested in participating. Nursing staff who work in the areas of art program implementation should be educated regarding the possible benefits of this program, as well as how to identify patients who may wish to participate. Approval from physicians and administrators also may be required.

Conclusion

The "Arts in Nursing" program offered the benefits of artistic expression for patients with chronic renal disease. Nursing staff also witnessed the benefits for involved patients. Following a story about the program that appeared in the employee newsletter, a donation was received that will fund the program for another 2 years and also allow expansion of the program to other patient populations.

ADDITIONAL READING


REFERENCES


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