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# Facilitating Sensitive Communication Within an Undergraduate Nursing Curriculum: the use of simulated role play in bereavement care

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**Effective communication is recognised as the cornerstone of service provision and is, therefore, pivotal to nursing and healthcare (National Institute for Clinical Excellence, 2004). However, communicating effectively requires nurses to develop knowledge and skills which enable them to have sensitive conversations with patients and/or families when they may be at their most vulnerable. Some of these sensitive conversations may occur in end-of-life care, such as when supporting families in the bereavement period (Buckley, 2008). This can be an area of practice where students lack preparedness and may feel inadequate or unsure of what to say to people who have been bereaved. The School of Nursing & Midwifery offers third year nursing students an opportunity to take part in simulation as an experiential learning method, and the need for role play scenarios on communication within the simulation programme was recognised. This simulated role play scenario provided students with an opportunity to practise and reflect on the communication skills required to support a recently bereaved family member.**

## Aim of Simulated Role Play

The aim of this simulated role play scenario was to facilitate students in experiencing a sensitive conversation with a recently bereaved family member.

## Learning Outcomes

It was identified that at the end of this simulated role play scenario, students would be able to discuss:

- the importance of active listening with a family member who has recently been bereaved;
- the use of appropriate questioning in a sensitive and empathetic manner
- the appropriate use of touch;
- the importance of providing verbal and written information on bereavement care and support services.

To facilitate the role play, the lecturer played the role of a recently bereaved family member. Two student nurses were asked to role play community nurses who had been involved with providing palliative care to this lady's husband at home. They were asked to simulate a joint visit to sympathise

and provide support to this lady following the death of her husband in the local hospice. The students were asked to demonstrate how they would support this lady sensitively in this situation, in addition to providing her with written information in the form of an 'Information about Bereavement' leaflet. Other students observed the role play and group feedback and discussion took place following the simulated scenario. This feedback and discussion reflected the learning outcomes and centred on the importance and use of active listening skills, the types of appropriate questions used and observed, and the appropriate use of touch in supporting people who have been bereaved.

A formative evaluation took place with eleven undergraduate nursing students. Data were collected using a short five-item proforma which consisted of four open questions and one closed question. The open questions sought to establish what the students found helpful regarding this simulated role play experience, what they had learned, and how they thought their experience of this type of simulated learning could be enhanced. Students evaluated this

learning experience positively and felt that the simulated scenario was enjoyable, useful and had gone well with very good support from the lecturers. Two key categories of data were generated from the open questions: 'Being in and dealing with a situation,' and 'Use of listening skills'.

## Being in and dealing with a situation

This category of data related to the value which students appeared to place on role playing a sensitive conversation with a bereaved family member. Being able to obtain the perceptions of their peers and lecturers in relation to what went well and what they could develop further was also thought valuable. This is illustrated by the quotes below:

*'It was good to practice how you would react in that situation and to gain feedback about what was good or bad' (P4)*

*'Being able to practise real life situations in a safe and supportive manner' (P5)*

*'Reminded me how important communication is and how to deal with bereavement' (P11)*

## Use of listening skills

This category of data reflected the learning which students articulated around the importance of using active listening skills. Students recognised that these skills should be a core part of their developing skill set. This can be seen in the quotes below:

*'In bereavement it's OK to be silent and have little to say to a grieving relative' (P1)*

*'Learned the importance of just listening and the importance of just being there' (P4)*

*'Reminded me that there is more than just clinical skills' (P3)*

The closed quantitative question asked the students to rate their simulated learning experience on a scale of 5-1 (5= Excellent, 4= Very Good, 3= Good, 2= Fair and 1= Poor). Nine students rated their experience as 5=Excellent and the remaining two students rated their experience as 4=Very Good.

The aim of this simulated role play scenario was to facilitate students in experiencing a sensitive conversation with a recently bereaved family member. Based on students' reported learning experience, this appears to have

created a raised awareness around the importance of coming alongside people who are bereaved and how giving time and their presence to someone can provide support. Further exploration of this simulated role play scenario should be replicated with a larger sample of student nurses and with other students representative of the wider multi-disciplinary team.

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