

**A STUDY EXPLORING PRACTICE NURSES
PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE OF HEALTH
PROMOTION IN THE LEINSTER AREA.**

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SUMMARY OF THESIS

ABSTRACT

Introduction

The Irish strategy 'Quality and Fairness A Health System for You' 2001 emphasises multidisciplinary team based service provision to individuals and the community, including the emphasis on preventative health promotion work. It aims to empower individuals and communities to improve their health and social well-being. Primary Care in Ireland is said to be the coalface for 90-95% of the population. Within the primary care area, General Practitioners are focused on the medical model. The Practice Nurses however, working within the same general practice setting are in an ideal position to take up the preventative work required to help reduce the national burden of chronic disease and contribute to reducing the global burden of chronic disease.

Aims

This study explored Practice Nurses professional experience of health promotion within the Leinster area. It sought an understanding of what types of health promotion and what particular areas it covers along with the tools used to communicate it. It sought to learn whether theory/model based interventions

were utilised, and sought to learn about any barriers or challenges in implementing it.

Methods

Data was gathered using a qualitative research design divided into two phases. It used a self-designed questionnaire as phase one, and key informant structured interviews as phase two. The questionnaire included mixed closed and open-ended questions and these were then subjected to thematic content analysis. The interviews were transcribed, coded and were also subjected to thematic content analysis.

Results

The findings highlighted Practice Nurses huge personal commitment to practicing health promotion. It also highlighted the need for a definite role, which needs to be defined and extended. The availability of continued professional development needs to be assessed along with the requirement for a mandatory introductory course to facilitate nurses in the transition stage between secondary and primary care. The lack of the vital ingredient of “protected time” was emphasised and a lack of appropriate courses available in some cases was also made clear. Funding issues were highlighted along with other clearly stated challenges to achieving this role of health promoter within the primary care context.

Conclusions

Practice Nurses have a growing role in the health promotion areas of child vaccinations, family planning, well woman/men areas, positive lifestyle management area, and increasing involvement in the management of chronic disease. Practice Nurses can make a significant contribution to the health and well being of this country with appropriate support and recognition. The support of their primary care team colleagues would also be deemed invaluable to further their commitment of care for their patients.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION AND SIGNIFICANCE OF STUDY

1.1 Introduction

Having worked as a Practice Nurse for ten years within a primary care team, but overseas, this researcher had a keen interest in the role and practice of Practice Nurses particularly in relation to health promotion. This population of Practice Nurses working in the Leinster region of Ireland became the focus of this study.

A 1999ⁱ UK study found that Practice Nurses play an important role in primary care delivery, but that their precise job role was not clear. Its findings suggested that, a varied amount of decision-making was carried out, depending on the individual and their competence; their work range included an increasing amount of chronic disease management and minor illness triaging. As their work role was unclear, salary re-numeration was not appropriate for some Practice Nurses. Their role was found to be, 'least advanced' for mental health issues.

It seems that the situation in Ireland for Practice Nurses today is somewhat similar. The Irish government have via their document ⁱⁱ 'Quality and Fairness A Health System for You' 2001 started to put into place many significant changes across the health service area, with a stated aim to push Primary Care and Primary Health Care to the forefront. These are seen as the first point of contact between individuals and the health and personal social services. However Maeve Wren, an Irish health services commentator, made the comment that this government would seem to have turned its back on its own strategy,ⁱⁱⁱ particularly by not making appropriate funding available for the setting up of primary health care clinics. The health strategy stated that Primary Care ^{iv}:

“ Needs to become the central focus of the health system. The development of a properly integrated primary care service can lead to better outcomes, better health status and better cost-effectiveness.”

Practice Nursing commenced officially in Ireland in 1989 ^v when the Dept of Health formally offered a subsidy to General Practitioners, towards the cost of employing a practice nurse provided that her contract had a clear job description and that a copy of it was to be held by the Dept of Health. Practice Nurses have increased the scope of their role since then. Their role in Ireland is ^{vi} seen as a generalist one practicing in many areas such as women’s health, diabetes, coronary heart disease, asthma and immunisations. Practice Nurses are also getting involved in autonomous roles carrying out nurse led clinics within the practice. According to ^{vii} An Bord Altranais scope of nursing and midwifery framework, the scope of nursing practice in Ireland is:

“ The range of roles, functions, responsibilities and activities, which a registered nurse is educated, competent and has the authority to perform.”

These guidelines were written for General Nurses and Midwives. Practice Nurses use these where they can.

The focus of this study was on one aspect of the Practice Nurses role, that of Health Promotion. Health Promotion is an important area. The World Health Organisation’s definition of health promotion as described in the Ottawa Charter is:

“Health promotion is the process of enabling people to increase control over, and to improve, their health. To reach a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being, an individual or group must be able to identify and to realize aspirations, to satisfy needs, and to change or cope with the environment. Health is, therefore, seen as a resource for everyday life, not the objective of living. Health is a positive concept emphasizing social and personal resources, as well as physical capacities. Therefore, health promotion is not just the responsibility of the health sector, but goes beyond healthy life-styles to well-being.”

This study sought to determine whether this particular group of Practice Nurses saw themselves as health promoters, and if so, how they carried this role out and with what support. The ^{viii} global burden of chronic diseases is constantly rising:

“Chronic diseases, such as heart disease, stroke, cancer, chronic respiratory diseases and diabetes, are by far the leading cause of mortality in the world, representing 60% of all deaths. Out of the 35 million people who died from chronic disease in 2005, half were under 70 and half were women.”

Practice Nurses should be in a position to use their health promotion skills in a very positive way to be part of the global battle to help reduce these statistics. Nurses ^{ix} in Ireland could have an active role in influencing health policy but according to Ryan et al

“Their potential power as professional advocates is currently not being realised.”

A thorough search was carried out for Irish studies on this topic but with limited results. Literature on nurses and particular areas of health promotion activity was accessible but sourcing studies with an overview of health promotion and Practice Nurses was a challenge. UK studies were informative, but many were over ten years old.

1.2 Research Question

A study exploring Practice Nurses professional experience of health promotion within the Leinster region.

1.3 Aims and Objectives

The objective of this study was to explore Practice Nurses professional experience of health promotion within this designated region of Leinster. In particular:

- Their own health promotion training.
- Their way of communicating it either verbally or through written word or via media resources to individuals or groups.
- The time they have to carry it out.
- What theory/model based knowledge they used to underpin it, what importance they attached to communication, and what barriers or challenges they have encountered.

It is hoped that this exploration may provide insights into whether Practice Nurses within the Leinster area see themselves professionally as being in an appropriate role to be health promoters, and to understand how they carry out this role. Ascertaining whether they use theory/model-based knowledge to underpin the basics of their promotion of health as would be taught on specifically designed health promotion courses would be important also.

1.4 Research Design

This is a qualitative study divided into two phases. Phase one, incorporates a specifically self-designed questionnaire to obtain a wider feedback of their professional experience of health promotion from Practice Nurses working within the Leinster region.

Phase two involved using the data obtained from phase one and designing structured questions based on their themes to use in key informant structured interviews.

1.5 Summary

This study used questionnaires and in depth interviews, to explore Practice Nurses experience of health promotion within the Leinster region of Ireland. It inquired about their educational background to carry out health promotion; the time they required to promote health. Whether they carried out opportunistic health promotion or whether they were involved in dedicated health promotion clinics aimed towards managing chronic diseases. They were asked what support if any they received to carry out health promotion and what challenges they faced in this pursuit. The following chapter will present and review the available literature on this topic.

CHAPTER 4

RESULTS

4.1 Introduction

This qualitative study has been divided up into two phases.

Phase one involved a self designed questionnaire. It sought to anonymously gather 154 Practice Nurses working in the Leinster region's views of their professional experience of health promotion. 80 responses were received amounting to 52% of that population. However four questionnaires were returned uncompleted, as the respondents had changed their job role. The study then proceeded with 76 responses amounting to 49% of the population for phase one.

The findings for phase one will be presented under three headings:

- Health Promotion
- Continuing Professional Development
- Barriers and Challenges to health promotion

Phase two of the study sought the expert views via structured interviews, of three key informants working closely with Practice Nurses.

The findings for phase two will be outlined under the following headings:

- The Practice Nurse Role
- Challenges of The Practice Nurse Role
- Continuing Professional Education and Development
- Health Promotion Courses
- Funding for Health Promotion Courses
- Practice Nurse Contracts
- Challenges of Professional Development Coordinators in relation to Practice Nurses

The Career Path for Practice Nurses

5.2 Summary of Findings

The findings of this study can be broadly summarised as follows:

- **The role of the Practice Nurse needs further definition and recognition.**
- **The scope of practice for Practice Nurses needs to be defined and extended.**
- **The availability of continual professional development needs to be assessed.**
- **The barriers to Practice Nurses practising health promotion need to be examined.**

5.5 Conclusions

Practice Nurses in the Leinster region of Ireland have involved themselves in health promotion be it either ad hoc or organised as in chronic disease clinics. Some Practice Nurses don't have time to practice health promotion at all, due to a task based job roles only. There are no formal requirements for them to practice it. The latest Irish College of General Practitioners (ICGP) document, 'The Practice Nurse' A Guide to Nursing in General Practice. 2006 is a useful document. It describes what the Practice Nurse role is and what they need, to further their role, as in continuing professional development. The specific scope of practice for Practice Nurses has not been outlined though all nurses work under the guidelines of An Bord Altranais scope for nurses and midwives. However the Practice Nurses role is complex. Literature has shown that Practice Nurses see themselves as being completely accountable for whatever they carry out as part of this challenging role. Continual professional development is vital for this role. Without it, it cannot be ensured that Practice Nurses are carrying out evidenced based care and health promotion. In this study, the barriers Practice Nurses highlighted to practicing health promotion showed a lack of knowledge and education in particular areas. General Practitioners are not contracted to promote health nor do many see their role as encompassing health promotion. Though there are signs that that may be changing. While Practice Nurses are not contracted to practice health promotion either, they see it as very much part of their role. They are becoming part of the growing primary health care teams as required by the health strategy 2001. In a world where 60% of deaths are due to chronic disease, their knowledge can be utilised.

John Catford, the editor in chief of The Health Promotion International Journal in his March issue this year made the point that (ref 19):

“We as health promoters have a responsibility to ensure that the epidemic of chronic disease is anticipated, understood and acted upon urgently. It is also essential to communicate the latest and most accurate knowledge and information to frontline health professionals and the public at large.” He added that:

“There is compelling evidence that children’s experience’s in early life can strongly impact their health and well-being later in life. Chronic disease prevention, therefore, needs to take account of the impact of cumulative and interactive exposures to the underlying determinants of health and associated risk factors. Health outcomes are likely to be most optimal when good health is promoted throughout life, beginning with the pre-natal period and infancy.”

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ⁱ Sheffield Study. Practice Nurses: what do they do? A study of roles, responsibilities and patterns of work. [online][access 2006 May] Available from URL

<http://www.innovate.org.uk/library/practicenurses>

ⁱⁱ Department of Health and Children Quality and Fairness. A Health System for you. 2001 The Stationary Office.. Dublin.

ⁱⁱⁱ Tussing A D. Wren. M A *How Ireland Cares. The case for Health Reform.* New Island. 2006. 166-167.

^{iv} Department of Health and Children. *Primary Care. A New Direction. Quality and Fairness- A Health System for You* 2001. The Stationary Office. Dublin.

^v Department of Health. Circular 5/89. *GMS-General Practice Development Fund.* 1989

^{vi} Taylor R. Practice Nurses- An expensive commodity that can be done without? *Irish Practice Nurse.* AGM 2006.

^{vii} An Bord Altranais. Scope of Nursing and Midwifery Practice Framework. Policy Guidelines. 2000.

^{viii} World Health Organisation . Chronic Disease and Health Promotion. [Online][access 2007 June] Available from URL <http://www.who.int/chp/en/>

^{ix} Ryan D Mannix McNamara. P. Deasy. *C Health Promotion in Ireland. Principles, Practice and Research.* 2006. Gill & Macmillan.