Conference presentations: developing nursing knowledge by disseminating research findings

Conference presentations provide a potentially valuable means of encouraging more nurses to contribute to the development of nursing knowledge. This article by Brenda Happell, intended especially for novice presenters, aims to help nurses decide the most appropriate conference at which to present.

Introduction

Conference presentations provide an ideal opportunity for nurses to convey and share important knowledge with their peers in a supportive environment. However, the literature that directly addresses conference presentations remains quite sparse. The large number of nursing conferences now available challenges nurses to consider the most appropriate one at which to present. The aim of this paper is to offer a tool to the novice presenter to assist in selecting a conference. The importance of conference presentations for the perpetuation of nursing knowledge is also discussed.

Nursing practice is constantly challenged to keep pace with increasing health demands in the face of finite economic resources. However, the nursing literature suggests consistently that nurses do not tend to use research findings in their practice, primarily because the findings are considered difficult to access, difficult to read or not directly relevant to clinical practice (Carrion et al 2004, 2007, 2003, 2002, 2000).

The limited publication of research findings relating to clinical nursing practice undoubtedly contributes to the perpetuation of this reluctance (Edwards and Valley 2003, Meadows 2004, Mee 2003, Sedhom et al 2000, Wills 2000). If nurses do not read about research, they are even less likely to engage in research activity, and less likely still to publish research outcomes.

The contribution nursing makes to the development of knowledge pertinent to mental health care and treatment is nevertheless substantial. Although they may not commonly engage in formal research, nurses play a pivotal role in quality improvement projects. Although such projects do not generally attract the same degree of status, there is no succinct definition that clearly distinguishes between the two activities (Cleary and Horsfall 2002); indeed, projects may be described as ‘quality improvement’ to remove the requirement for ethics approval to be obtained (Cleary and Horsfall 2002).

Given that they are specifically designed to address particular consumer-focused needs, quality improvement projects clearly make a valuable contribution to knowledge (Cleary and Horsfall 2002), and potentially produce findings at least as worthy of publication as the more traditional research projects. However, this work does not commonly find itself published in refereed journals (Mee 2003, Mulhall 1996, Happell 2005, Stepnaski 2002). If nursing knowledge is considered to be important and worthy of publication as the literature suggests (Edwards and Valley 2003, Mee 2003, Sedhom et al 2000, Wills 2000), it is necessary to gain a greater understanding of the reluctance of nurses to publish.

The available literature has tended to focus on factors such as lack of time and confidence (Oermann 2003). Beyond this, there is some discussion about nurses not recognising that the work they undertake is sufficiently important or interesting enough to warrant publication (Happell 2005). With the exception of time, these barriers could be overcome by implementing specific strategies to promote the importance of nursing work and to enhance skills in writing for publication.
Would this be sufficient to encourage nurses to engage in writing for publication? The short answer is that it is unlikely. Nursing has been recognised as a profession that relies far more heavily on oral than on written forms of communication (Heartfield 1996, Hardey et al 2000, Martin and Street 2003). This is demonstrated through the traditional nursing practice of the patient handover, where information regarding the care and treatment of patients is conveyed from nurses to nurses (Parker et al 2002). And while written patient notes are completed by nurses, they tend to provide an overview of the shift’s events retrospectively rather than describing specific problems or planning future patient care (Martin and Street 2003, Griffiths 1998, Hale et al 1997).

There is no basis to assume that this oral tradition in nursing relates only to communication about patient care. Indeed, it is likely that the preference for oral over written applies to the communication of more systemic aspects of nursing knowledge. If this premise is accepted as accurate, it is important to rethink our attitudes to encouraging and promoting the dissemination of nursing knowledge, with a greater emphasis on encouraging nurses to present their findings at conferences in keeping with the oral tradition of nursing.

Conferences for nurses

It might be argued that nurses do not need to be encouraged to present at conferences because they already do so in large numbers. Indeed, the ‘events and conferences’ section of the Royal College of Nursing website shows that 44 conferences accredited by the college were held during 2006. This represents only a proportion of nursing conferences held in the UK. So, without even taking into account international and multidisciplinary events, conferences for and of interest to nurses are plentiful.

While information on the number of nurses attending conferences is not readily available, it is well understood, particularly by those who have been actively involved in organising them, that conferences are highly time-intensive and costly to stage and are therefore dependent on their viability. Viability is most clearly measured by numbers of attendees. Put simply, if large numbers of conferences are being run, then large numbers of nurses are attending them, and conference programmes demonstrate that significant numbers of nurses are presenting at them. It is, however, unreasonable to conclude that because
nurses are presenting and attending conferences nothing more needs to be achieved. Despite the large number of events organised for nurses, there are no published papers describing the characteristics of those who attend or the type of conferences most likely to attract clinicians as presenters and delegates.

Nurse academics and managers are undoubtedly well placed to attend conferences, not only to disseminate nursing knowledge but to act as role models in encouraging other nurses, particularly those from clinical practice, to do so as well. If we accept the fact that nurses actively engaged in practice have the potential to contribute to nursing knowledge by sharing their clinical expertise (Happell 2005), it is important that conference presentations are viewed as a valuable and important step in this process.

**Why should nurses present at conferences?**
Notwithstanding the high volume available, conferences, as an avenue for the dissemination of nursing knowledge, receive little attention in the literature. The existing material tends to relate to tips on enhancing the quality of presentations and ways of reducing nervousness (Gregg and Pierce 1994, Pellecchia 1999, Strickland 1999). Such material only becomes useful once the nurse has already made a decision to present a paper. Information about what encourages nurses to take this step appears to be totally absent from the literature.

The first step in considering whether to present a paper is likely to be recognition by nurses that they have something to say that would be of interest to colleagues. Clearly this is a complex issue that requires the implementation of a raft of interventions designed to encourage nurses to recognise and value the important contribution they make to client outcomes. Once nurses recognise that they have knowledge, skills or expertise likely to be of interest to colleagues, a new set of issues opens up, such as deciding which of the multitude of conferences would be the most appropriate. Aside from collegial networks, there is little information to guide this process and one of the aims of this paper is to provide some basis upon which to make this decision.

**Choosing the conference**
The sheer number and diversity of conferences available may generate considerable confusion in the novice presenter. In choosing, the interested nurse
might benefit from considering the following questions:

**What do you want to achieve as a result of the presentation?**
Responses might include the opportunity to network with colleagues sharing similar interests; the ability to influence practice; and prestige. If the answer is mainly networking, nurses would be more likely to benefit from attending professional nursing-based conferences, particularly those developed by specific specialist groups such as psychiatric nurses. If the aim is to gain prestige then the nurse should choose a higher profile event. The prestige of a conference is not always immediately apparent, although prestigious events are more likely to be national or international events, with high profile presenters for keynote addresses and/or invited speakers. They are also more likely to be aimed at academics and more senior managers. In the case of first-time presenters, it is unlikely that prestige will be a strong determining factor and indeed it would probably be preferable to aim for collegiality before prestige.

**Who do you want your audience to be?**
This could be nurses from one’s own area of specialty practice. On the other hand, the presenter may want to take a much broader view and move beyond their specialty area to describe their specialist skills and knowledge to a broader audience. This is particularly pertinent for psychiatric nurses, given the increased incidence of mental health problems becoming evident in general health care (Arie 2001, Birleson et al 2000, McMahon et al 2001, Mott and Kingsley 1999, Sharrock and Happell 2000, Snowdon et al 1996). Psychiatric nurses with a keen interest in improving the physical health care of users experiencing mental health problems might find it highly relevant to present at non-mental health specialist events. Indeed, they may wish to go further still and present to other health professionals, consumers of health services, carers or policy-makers.

**Where do you want to present?**
The nurse must choose between local, national or international conferences. A number of factors need to be considered, not least of which is finance. Conferences can be costly but the closer to home the smaller the costs of travel
and accommodation. The subject matter of the presentation will also be a strong determinant. There is no point presenting information likely to be well known to a local audience. On the other hand the information might present a new innovation nationally or internationally. The nurse would be well advised to use collegial networks to determine how well the subject matter is known.

The answers to these three questions should help the nurse to narrow options down to a smaller number of conferences. Again, collegial networks can provide valuable feedback on the experiences of others. Irrespective of whether nurses present, it is very frustrating to attend a conference full of expectations about exchanging information and gaining new knowledge, only to find the experience falls well short of expectations. A first-hand account from a like-minded and respected colleague can be extremely valuable.

While nurses may be daunted when considering the cost of conferences, they may be able to access funding to cover costs fully or partially. Hospital and healthcare services generally have monies available to support conference presentations and are a useful first port of call. Other sources include nursing registration authorities, professional organisations, industrial organisations and pharmaceutical companies. Many nurses appear unaware of the availability of funding sources.

The conference presentation and beyond
Those who have presented at conferences are well aware of the preparation and planning required. Following the conference, with much of the hard work already done, a nurse may, with sufficient encouragement, be more likely to consider further developing the presentation with a view to submitting an article for publication in a refereed journal. The conference presentation can therefore be viewed as a step towards encouraging the dissemination of nursing knowledge. If this proves to be the case, encouraging conference presentation would be a more productive and satisfying strategy, and one that might lead to further outcomes in the future.

To this end, novice presenters should seek constructive feedback about their presentations. This should be sought from colleagues who feel able to provide honest critique; others may feel uncomfortable about offering comment that
could be perceived as negative. Accepting critique can be very challenging. It is helpful if the presenter looks on the process as a learning experience. Interaction with other new presenters is also helpful and helps one realise that nerves and anxiety happen to others as well.

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