The development of creative and analytical skills is an essential aspect of nurse education, as evidence-based practice is the essential underpinning of clinical nursing.

Nursing students can make the link between theory and practice by completing academic assignments such as literature reviews and implementing their knowledge in the clinical area.

Literature reviews provide a critical overview of research in a particular topic area and enable students to analyse current research findings. While literature reviews undertaken in an academic context are used primarily to explain the rationale for a research study, those undertaken in the clinical practice context are intended to uncover the best practice for the particular patient group.

Literature reviews undertaken for this latter purpose should:

- Include a variety of sources including conference papers, journal articles and unpublished studies.
- Examine different opinions, noting the volume of papers that agree and disagree.
- Acknowledge mitigating factors in methodologies.
- Highlight studies revealing best practice that can be replicated.

Strategies for implementing evidence-based practice

1. Raise team awareness of the need for practice to be evidence based.
2. Identify concerns about specific areas of clinical practice where better evidence may lead to improvement.
3. Raise the level of team expertise by drawing on internal expertise, accessing and critically appraising peer reviewed journal articles on the topic and arranging education sessions to improve knowledge.
4. Discuss with the team how a new evidence-based practice is to be introduced.
5. Determine outcome and audit measures.
6. Introduce the new practice.
7. Monitor and evaluate progress.

Allow conclusions to be drawn on improvements in practice. A recent review was undertaken by students of publications that described symptoms experienced by patients with rectal cancer receiving radiotherapy, and the impact of this on their quality of life. Common adverse effects that were documented included diarrhoea, dermatological problems, micturition problems, fatigue, sexual dysfunction and pain.

Interventions

Some symptoms led to a decline in quality of life during treatment, which is associated with prolonged surgical recovery times. The literature suggests a number of interventions that nurses can use to alleviate symptoms.

Awareness of adverse effects enables nurses to assess symptoms, plan and implement appropriate interventions and evaluate outcomes. This can assist in optimising the quality of life of patients with rectal cancer and may hasten post-operative recovery times.

Nursing students can help bridge the gap between academia and clinical practice by studying the literature and disseminating these findings, and can act as the stimulus for generating improvements in practice (see box) NS

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RESOURCES

Student Life online
www.nursing-standard.co.uk/students
rcnpublishing.com/r/studentlife
Literature review: Preoperative radiotherapy and rectal cancer: tinyurl.com/ogormanLR
How to conduct a literature review:
tinyurl.com/litureReview