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Sherry R. Lovan

Western Kentucky University, sherry.lovan@wku.edu

M. Susan Jones

Western Kentucky University, susan.jones@wku.edu

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Occupational Health Assessment: A Tool for Nursing Faculty

Sherry R. Lovan, PhD, RN

M. Susan Jones, PhD, RN, CNE

School of Nursing

Western Kentucky University

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Occupational Health Assessment: A Tool for Nursing Faculty

The goal of occupational health nursing is to promote and protect the health and safety of the working population (Rogers, 2003). In May 2010, the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics reported that 65% of the U.S. civilian population was active in the workforce. Maintaining the health and safety of this large group presents an ongoing challenge for employers and healthcare professionals. Nurse educators strive to find effective and meaningful strategies to teach occupational health and safety content to nursing students. While most community/public health nursing textbooks include theory on occupational health nursing and information about the multiple roles of the nurse, there are limited occupational health nurses available for placement of students in a clinical learning experience. To fill this void, an innovative occupational health assessment (OHA) assignment was created, implemented, and evaluated with the goal to expose students to workplace health risks associated with diverse occupations.

Most people have preconceived ideas of various occupations but possess little knowledge of the health risks involved. New meanings surface when students investigate an unfamiliar work environment from the workers' perspective. For example, most students realize that a fire fighter has a dangerous job; however, after completing the OHA they understand that one of the greatest health risks in this occupation includes psychosocial health risks to not only the worker but also his family. This type of learning closely parallels the framework of Ausubel (1978) who presented assimilation theory as a method for a learner to assimilate old meanings with new meanings.

Initially, the student reviews course materials and participates in class discussion about health risks associated with various occupations and how the occupational health nurse serves to minimize these risks through primary and secondary prevention strategies. Next they choose an

occupation that interests them, select a person to interview, introduce themselves, explain the purpose of the assignment, and obtain permission to visit the work site and ask questions about the work environment. At the work site, the student uses a structured assessment guide to assess for any exposure to occupational risks that have the potential to impact the worker's health. The student assesses for six occupational risk categories modified from those identified by Rogers (2003) in the workplace: (a) physical, (b) chemical, (c) biological, (d) ergonomic, (e) psychosocial, and (f) technological risks. Next, the student interviews the worker and inquires about their perception of health risks in the work environment. After collecting this information, when appropriate, the student suggests ways to decrease or eliminate the identified health risks. They compare the worker's perception of health risks to their own and analyze the findings to formulate two priority nursing diagnoses. Finally, the student reviews the responses of the individual interviewed and writes a journal entry reflecting about the learning experience. They post this entry online which allows their classmates to learn about health risks associated with different occupations. Each journal entry is as unique as the diverse occupations the students choose to assess.

The OHA assignment resulted in positive outcomes for nursing students, nursing faculty, and individual workers. Students expanded their knowledge of the health risks associated with diverse occupations, nursing faculty created a way to fill the void of limited learning opportunities in the area of occupational health nursing, and workers obtained increased accessibility to health care information as students shared their observations about potential health risks at the worksite. The structure of the assignment allowed the students to create new meanings, appreciation, and understanding of workplace health risks and the role of the nurse in decreasing or eliminating these risks through primary and secondary prevention strategies.

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