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# Behavioral Health Self-Efficacy of Nurses in a Rural Emergency Department

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## BACKGROUND

Research demonstrates that rural emergency departments are often the entry point for many individuals with behavioral health needs into the social service system (American Hospital Association, 2007; Beckley, 2008; Broadbent, Jarman & Berk, 2002; University of Southern Maine, n.d; Wooden et al., 2009). It also suggests that general emergency department nurses are not equipped with the skills or knowledge necessary to appropriately serve and work with these individuals (Frances, 2000; Masori & Auerbach, 2009; Wand & White, 2007;). This information indicates the need for nurses to have more education and information related to working with emergency department patients with behavioral health needs. In rural hospitals where a social worker may not be present or on staff after hours or on weekends the importance of nursing staff self-efficacy regarding behavioral health issues is essential.

## PURPOSE

This project aims to provide a resource manual for the Waseca area which will be utilized by the emergency department's nursing staff. As described above, the need for nursing staff to know how to work with, handle, and appropriately refer behavioral health patients is an essential piece of emergency department nursing. After receiving an orientation on the composition of the new resource manual, emergency department nursing staff will have a better understanding of what to do when the social worker is not present as well as feel more comfortable with their knowledge related to behavioral health patients.

This project has the potential to improve services for individuals with mental or behavioral health issues that come into the Waseca Medical Center Emergency Department. In a rural setting, a social worker is often not available for mental health patients who come to the emergency room. Patients who present with behavioral health disorders often "elicit negative emotions [from nurses] such as fear, which may lead to segregation of the client" (Frances, 2000, p. 36). By providing the education and resources necessary to competently and responsibly treat these individuals the social worker has the opportunity to improve care for patients.

## METHODS

The sample for the present study consisted of 20 nurses from the Waseca Medical Center (N=20). The study was conducted over a period of approximately two months at the Waseca Medical Center in Waseca, MN. The study was designed to be administered as a survey in which nursing staff indicated their comfort level in regards to working with behavioral health patients in the emergency department. Nursing staff were asked to complete a seven question survey as well as provide any additional information they believed would be helpful when working with mental health patients. Questions were in a Likert-Scale format. Data was gathered over a three week period and then analyzed. Analysis was completed using Microsoft Office Excel.

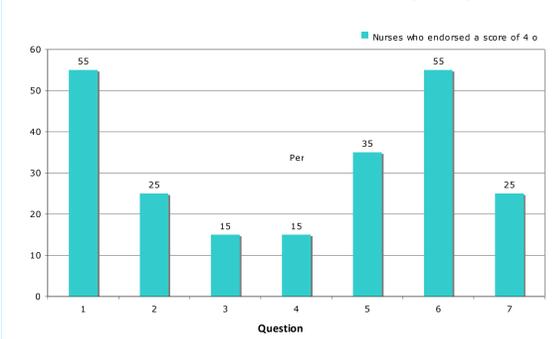
The methodology for constructing and compiling the resource manual included an exhaustive search of area resources utilizing the internet, current lists of frequently used numbers in the emergency department, and resources from Immanuel St. Joseph's emergency department resource book. The book was organized according to area of service (housing, food, abuse reporting) in order to be user friendly. Services from the local area as well as some from Greater Minnesota were included. The reason for inclusion of resources not in the area was due to the fact that sometimes the services requested are not available in the immediate area. For example, a child's psychiatric unit in Duluth is often the first place nursing staff may need to try when placing a child into inpatient treatment. Upon completion of the manual's construction and the completion of the surveys, the researcher educated nurses on how the book was constructed, what information was included, and answered any questions nursing staff had.

## FINDINGS/RESULTS

The purpose of the present study was to evaluate the confidence and self-efficacy of the nurses at the Waseca Medical Center in the emergency department. Based on the information gathered, the nursing staff do not exhibit high levels of confidence and self-efficacy when working with mental health patients. This supports the need for training and education surrounding area resources and other services available for patient with behavioral health needs. The resource manual which was developed in response to these findings should support nursing staff with their requests for more information which may then increase confidence and self-efficacy.

The most significant findings were related to nursing education and the resources available in the community for mental health patients. Only 15 percent of nursing staff surveyed indicated that they were comfortable with their knowledge of community resources. In regards to whether or not their nursing education provided them the information necessary to work with mental health patients in an emergency room setting, only 15 percent of nurses endorsed having received adequate education. The areas the nurses felt most confident in were agency policies and procedures (55 percent) and ability to recognize symptoms of mental illness (55 percent). The graphs below show the distribution of data for the survey questions.

Confidence in Skills and Abilities (N=20)



### Survey Questions

- 1.) I feel competent in the policies and procedures of our facility related to working with patients in the emergency room.
- 2.) I feel confident when working with clients who come into the emergency room with mental health issues.
- 3.) I feel my nursing education prepared me to work with patients with mental health issues in the emergency room setting.
- 4.) I feel confident in my knowledge of community resources available to mental health patients in our emergency room.
- 5.) I know where to look for resources available to mental health patients in the emergency room.
- 6.) I feel confident in my ability to recognize typical symptoms of specific mental health issues which may present in an emergency room setting (i.e. schizophrenia, suicidal ideation).
- 7.) I feel confident in my knowledge of how to handle situations typically handled by the social worker if she is not present (i.e. nursing home placement, reporting of suspected child abuse).

### Qualitative Findings

In addition to the quantitative data which was gathered, qualitative data in the form of two open ended questions was also obtained. Here are some of the comments made by nursing staff in response to the following questions:

**What would be the most helpful thing for you to know when working with a patient in the emergency department exhibiting symptoms of mental illness?**

"What to do and who/what resources I have"

"How to best help the patient"

"Social workers phone number"

**What sort of information would be the most helpful in regards to services for patients in the emergency department who have behavioral health needs?**

"What are the community resources available for patients with behavioral health needs?"

"Stream-line the 'look up system' for resources"

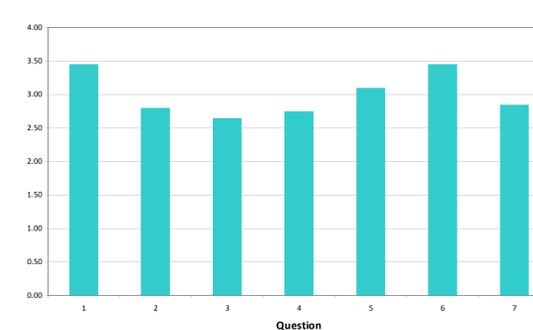
"Resources available"

"Family or other support services available"

"Counselors within the town or county"

"I would like to be aware of many of the resources that social workers have access to"

Overall Average Rating (N=20)



## DISCUSSION

The findings of the present study provide some interesting insight into the skills and abilities of emergency department nurses in a rural hospital. While many of the nurses were comfortable with the more procedural and medically based questions (agency protocol and recognition of symptoms) the nurses reported relatively low levels of confidence and self-efficacy in issues related to behavioral and mental health. As previously discussed, there is not a social worker available twenty four hours a day in the emergency room at the Waseca Medical Center. This means that the nursing staff need to fill the gap which currently exists between mental health patients in the emergency room and the referrals to area agencies or resources they need. Since hospital emergency rooms are often the entry point for many individuals into the mental health system, it is critical that this gap in services is closed. It is also important nursing staff are knowledgeable about area resources and other behavioral and mental health issues as rural areas typically do not have all the resources and agencies available to assist those in need. By being knowledgeable as well as being confident in their knowledge, nursing staff can provide the proper information and referrals to emergency room mental health patients.

## LIMITATIONS

The present study, while providing information indicating the need for more education during nursing school as well as more training on area resources, has some limitations which must be addressed. First, the study had a relatively small number of participants. Some nursing staff did not complete the survey which led to a smaller population that originally intended. Further, the researcher was not able to obtain any data or ratings after the nursing staff had had the opportunity to be trained on and utilize the area resource manual. Future research focusing on surveying the same staff at a later date might provide data which further supports the need for social services available in an emergency department in either the form of an emergency department social worker or nurses who are more educated about mental health patients and area resources.

## IMPLICATIONS

This research indicates the need for a social worker in the emergency department of a rural area hospital, or at least more training and education regarding behavioral health for the emergency department nurses.

This study supported the previous research which suggests that nurses do not receive the education necessary for working with behavioral health patients in the emergency department. In rural areas, social workers in hospitals are not the norm, posing a problem for citizens of the communities in which the hospitals are located.

The Waseca Medical Center may benefit from providing more individualized education regarding area resources during new nursing staff orientation. By providing this information to the nursing staff, patients in the emergency department will have the opportunity for more patient education, especially regarding area resources and programs which would benefit them.