

Connecting Points

PSYCHIATRIC NURSING

THE INTERNET: FACILITATING AN INTERNATIONAL NURSING CULTURE FOR PSYCHIATRIC NURSES*

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The Internet has become a "hot topic" in recent years. Whether you dismiss the Internet as "megahype"¹ or a poor substitute for speech and other forms of human contact (*Sunday Star-Times*, August 11, 1996:C7), its impact undoubtedly is beginning to be felt in nursing circles. There has been a veritable scramble to publish articles outlining the benefits of the Internet to nurses and providing guidelines on how to use this new tool.²⁻⁵

Absent thus far has been any analysis of how psychiatric nurses actually use the Internet, how those that do have learned the skills needed to make themselves understood, and what these experienced Internet users project the impact of the Internet will be on psychiatric nursing culture. This was the subject of a research project I undertook. The abridged version of the research report is presented here and provides a precis of the methodology, results, and discussion.

Method and Respondents

The study was conducted by e-mail. I sent an e-mail message to three nursing discussion groups requesting that psychiatric nurses assist with the research by answering five questions. Assurances were given that no identifying data would be included in the final research report. The e-mail responses were stripped of extraneous data (such as

e-mail addresses) and entered into the software package NUD*IST. The responses were then categorized and coded line by line according to themes that were identified from the data. The preliminary results were published on the World Wide Web⁷ and feedback was sought from participants that tended to validate the themes that were described.

Thirty-six responses were used in the final analysis. Most of these originated from the psych-nursing list that had 368 members at the time. Respondents' experience of using the Internet ranged from 1 week to 10 years; the majority had used the Internet for less than 2 years. Responses came from the United Kingdom, United States, Australia, New Zealand, Finland, Holland, Hong Kong, and Japan and were from psychiatric nurses in practice and academic settings.

Results: How Psychiatric Nurses use the Internet

Respondents identified communicating and networking, researching, obtaining software, recreation, and keeping abreast of the news as the main ways in which they used the Internet. Communication appeared to be the dominant use. E-mail, Internet relay chat, World Wide Web, and telnet were the most common applications described.

The usefulness of the Internet for respondents most commonly involved relating to others. Many commented that their involvement with other nurses through the Internet engendered a sense of connectedness and universality. Examples of tangible support provided by others and of giving and receiving advice were shown. E-mail in particular was a tool that respondents said was useful to share concerns, keep in touch with others, and develop networks of friends and contacts. E-mail discussion groups were viewed

as a useful way to challenge assumptions and develop ideas.

Internet communication was viewed as having advantages over conventional modes of communication. Many said that people responded more promptly with e-mail and that consideration of differences in time zones and geographic distance were not important issues using the Internet. The financial cost savings and direct style, which has become a convention of e-mail, were cited as useful by respondents.

A consequence of respondents' involvement with the Internet was keeping current with news events and developments in the discipline of nursing. The ability to locate references and information for research, personal development, interest, and education was a useful feature. Accessing library catalogs and resources was described. Although useful information relevant to psychiatric nursing practice was not always available on the Internet, respondents stated that they often were able to find directions to the information that they needed. Only two respondents identified creating and sharing information as personally useful.

A large number of respondents did not perceive that there was a right or wrong way to communicate on the Internet or that conventions associated with other modes of communication applied. Others did not believe they had mastered the art of Internet communication at this time and believed that communicating well using e-mail and other means of Internet communication was very difficult. A few respondents had attended on-line courses or library courses on the Internet but most said trial and error was how they had learned how to communicate effectively. Some said they read computer books or the lists of frequently asked questions (FAQs) that often are posted automatically when a user joins an e-mail discussion group. More knowledgeable friends and col-

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leagues sometimes provided guidance when difficulties arose.

With e-mail discussion groups, a misunderstood message may result in others seeking clarification or sending an abrasive message in response (known as "flaming"). This was cited as most likely when a message included colloquialisms, was indirect, used humor, or was sarcastic or abrasive to others. "Lurking," a term coined to describe watching rather than participating in Internet discussion, was cited by many as the means by which they learned the norms of communication within particular discussion groups.

Almost all, respondents stated that the Internet would have a positive influence in forming, shaping, and developing a global psychiatric nursing culture. Respondents viewed the Internet as having the potential to affect nursing culture in three main areas:

Helping to build an international community of psychiatric nurses. Internet communication was viewed as having the potential to reduce the sense of isolation that many psychiatric nurses may feel as a result of being geographically isolated from peers or working in hostile environments. A sense of belonging to a community and the opportunities for participation by all were seen as possibilities that the Internet could offer. It was suggested that exposure to different cultures and differing viewpoints was seen as enriching and leading to a greater acceptance of diversity. The Internet might also provide opportunities for global collaboration in tackling issues of concern and the development of a shared language to express phenomena of concern to nurses. The greater accessibility to those with advanced knowledge also should lead to enhanced practice.

Enhancing interdisciplinary and intradisciplinary communication. The speed and efficiency of Internet communication and the phenomena of sharing that many respondents had encountered already on the In-

ternet was viewed as a factor that might enhance communication within the psychiatric nursing profession and between disciplines. On-line journals and opportunities for almost immediate feedback upon publication was envisioned as increasing communication.

Facilitating educational opportunities. The Internet offers great potential as an educative tool for both formal and informal learning. Some respondents spoke of their positive experiences communicating with students and lecturers through the Internet during courses in which they were enrolled. The development of distance education packages and possibilities for distance learners to collaborate on projects and access resources via the Internet were cited as likely developments on the Internet. Clinical supervision using e-mail that some respondents had undertaken already was seen as another opportunity for enhancing the practice of those unable to receive supervision through usual means.

Constraints for Psychiatric Nurses on the Internet

Respondents identified a number of constraints that need to be overcome before the Internet will have a major impact on nursing culture, including the prohibitive cost of Internet access in some parts of the world and access to computer technology. It was suggested that a substantially greater number of nurses needed to have access to the Internet and use it before the Internet will have any major impact on nursing culture. A barrier for many nurses is their discomfort and lack of confidence using the technology.

The superficiality and relative impermanence of much of the information on the Internet was suggested as limiting usefulness. Although this may often be the case, the lack of expertise that many people have in searching for information and judging the worth of information they find may be a greater

barrier. Respondents suggested that protocols and guidelines regarding confidentiality and the disclosure of personal information was necessary so that nurses could share clinical useful information.

One respondent suggested that psychiatric nurses in general are not interested in furthering their education unless there is some compulsion to do so. If this assertion is true it is unlikely that the Internet will have a major impact in nursing beyond academic circles where its use is already established.

In conclusion, these findings have provided an insight into how some psychiatric nurses use the Internet and how they believe the Internet will affect psychiatric nursing culture. The qualitative methodology used in this research precludes being able to generalize to a wider population; however, the themes identified are likely to be common to many nurses and other members of the Internet community.

The shape of the Internet is changing constantly, as are the applications that are being used on it. Respondents saw e-mail as a tool for collaborating, sharing, researching, and supervising but the form of e-mail is changing and it may be that text forms of e-mail will be superseded over time. Internet voice mail, video mail, and video conferencing already are a reality and their increasing use will alter again the norms of Internet communication. Nurse leaders are required who will pioneer the use of the evolving technology and explore uses that will benefit the profession and the individuals whom they serve.

The Internet has the potential to shape new roles for psychiatric nurses such as on-line consulting and counseling, health education, and clinical supervision. In education, the Internet is providing a virtual classroom. Students in remote areas are enjoying similar levels of tutor support to on-campus students with the added benefit of working at their own pace in the privacy of

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their own homes. Electronic journals with multimedia embellishments will become as common as print journals are today.

It is inevitable that the Internet will play a larger role in the lives of many people and change the way information is obtained, used, and shared; similarly, it will affect the way people communicate with each other across distance. However, it is unlikely that the Internet will replace other modes of communication and information sharing completely. Many people are not comfortable with the technology or they do not have access. Intellectual property rights, data security, and privacy are issues that also need addressing.

The greater availability of information may contribute to a loosening of the boundaries between disci-

plines, specialties, lay people, and professionals. On the one hand, this may be perceived as a threat to professions whose identities have been associated with a gate-keeping role on specialized information. On the other hand, this may be perceived as the greatest challenge and opportunity for demystifying the work that nurses do and forging new roles to bridge the gap between professional and lay knowledge. In either case, nurses are challenged to keep up to date with developments in their field and be critical consumers of the vast amount of information that is now available to them. The challenge to psychiatric nurses is to use the technology in a way that does indeed facilitate a global psychiatric nursing culture and enhance the well being of those they serve.

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