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School Nurses' Knowledge and Perceived Role in Mental Health Issues

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School Nurses' Knowledge and Perceived Role in Mental Health Issues

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ABSTRACT

Background:

There are 74.5 million children in the United States, 17.1 million currently or have previously dealt with a mental disorder (Children's Mental Health, 2015). Unfortunately, the negative stigma associated with mental health often causes those affected to not seek treatment. School nurses are on the front line of public health problems and deliver safe, effective evidence-based practice to their communities. To rebuild our broken mental health system, community nurses need to build upon school mental health services and encourage more in-school programs (Stephan, Weist, Kataoka, Adelsheim, & Mills, 2007). School nurses must be included in the discussion when seeking solutions to this escalating issue. The purpose of this study was to understand the school nurses' perspective on their role and management of mental health issues. This is a major topic impacting healthcare, especially nursing.

Methods:

A cross-sectional survey design was used to complete this study. A researcher developed survey was reviewed by content experts providing face validity. School nurses ($N =$ 200) completed a 10-minute paper survey at an Arkansas School Nurses Association (ASNA) meeting. Descriptive statistics, spearman's rho and chi-squared tests were used to analyze the data.

Results:

There was a positive correlation between the size of district and the number of roles nurses perceived themselves having as part of the mental health team when dealing with mental health concerns (p = 0.038). The same trend was found with the number of years licensed and the size of district (p = 0.049). Over 77% of school nurses perceived themselves to be a vital part of

the mental health team, wanted to continue their education on mental health nursing, and saw

mental health as a rising issue within their school districts.

Conclusions:

School nurses see themselves as a vital part of the mental health care team and believe

mental health issues are increasing in their schools. Nurses in this study desired additional

support in the form of education and an increase in mental health assistance programs to provide

effective care for the populations they serve.

Background and Significance

The prevalence of mental health issues in schools has grown exponentially. Unfortunately, mental health is stigmatized nationwide causing those affected to keep their problems to themselves and not seek treatment. Mental health may not be perceived as a medical condition by some because many times there is no visible evidence like there is for a severe burn or a broken hand (Zupp, 2012). Out of the 74.5 million children in the United States, 17.1 million currently or have previously dealt with a mental disorder ("Children's Mental Health," 2015). Children who experience mental illness and do not seeking treatment are at a greater risk of drug abuse, gang involvement, and academic failure. According to "Children's Mental Health Report" (2015), the most common mental health disorders in the United States include Anxiety Disorders and Attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). A National Health Interview Survey conducted in 2005-2006 noted that only 15% of parents expressed concern to a healthcare professional about their child's emotional and behavioral problems, and only 5.3% received treatment (Simpson, Cohen, Pastor, & Reuben, 2008). According to the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (2017), a large portion of mental illness issues that adults face started developing before they were 14 years old. It is evident that children experiencing mental health issues are possibly being ignored due to the stigmatism surrounding mental health and the lack of knowledge regarding the onset of psychiatric disorders. Simpson, Cohen, Pastor, and Reuben (2008) noted fewer than half of those children whose parents recognized concerning signs and notified a healthcare professional, established a form of treatment with their provider. According to Mental Health America (2016), we need to shift our focus to health promotion and prevention rather than treatment and screenings to reduce mental health incidences. As a society, it is important to destigmatize mental health and make it a daily conversation because increased awareness and

knowledge about mental health has led to positive outlooks towards it (Chandra & Minkovitz, 2007).

Mental health is defined as a state of well-being in which an individual can cope with everyday stress, be resilient and have hope, and contribute to society in a positive way (WHO, 2014). Many factors can affect an individual's mental health such as their genetic vulnerability and/or the environmental stressors they are surrounded by, as illustrated by the diathesis-stress model (Gazelle & Ladd, 2003). Mental health services are not only provided in hospitals and independent providers, but also in schools and community health centers (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2017).

School nurses are on the front line of public health promotion and deliver safe, effective evidence-based practice to their communities. Mental health incidents have been increasing in school aged children and caused the topic of mental health to be brought into the forefront as it has a profound effect on an individual's overall wellbeing (Bartlett, 2015). According to the U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Common Core of Data (2017), more than 55 million students will attend elementary and secondary schools in 2018. School nurses are in the perfect position to identifying signs of abnormal behavior in children whether it be behavioral or psychological, that may be lead a child down a destructive path such as joining a gang. Also, school nurses are in a unique position in which they can connect with parents to increase their engagement in their child's mental health (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2012). This can help build a child's support structure and promote free flowing communication between the nurse and the child's family. Nursing is one of the most trustworthy professions, giving them an advantage when it comes to school aged children. Children may be more willing to share feelings and concerns with their school nurse, who provides a safe

environment (Keogh, 2014). Nurses are obligated to protect patient information and keep the students' thoughts and concerns confidential (American Nurses Association, 2015). Costello, He, Sampson, Kessler, & Merikangas (2014) noted that adolescents were more likely to receive mental health services in the school setting than a specialty clinic, leading the school nurse to expand her scope of practice into mental health.

School nurses are changing and expanding their roles to adapt to health care needs within their communities. The rapid changes may lead to a lack of knowledge and confidence in intervening in mental health situations. Brown (2015) noted a study in which 93% of nurses indicated the prevalence of mental health within their everyday nursing role. With the growing frequency of mental health issues comes physical and emotional stressors for the school nurse. Nurses may feel the pressure due to their lack of knowledge and training in dealing with mental health issues (Leighton, Nolan, & Worraker, 2003). In addition, school nurses feel they are being pushed in many different directions such as promoting child safety, sexual health, and healthy lifestyle due to the increasing incidence of childhood obesity in the United States. Nurses indicate the need to focus on promoting an open, safe conversation about mental health and getting rid of social stigmas surrounding mental health as a way of normalizing it like the way society discusses and thinks about diabetes or heart disease (Barlett, 2015). By normalizing mental health and getting the public to see it as a medical diagnosis, it will allow for those affected by it to not feel singled out or embarrassed by their peers. Pryjmackuk, Graham, Haddad, & Tylee (2012) noted in their study that not just a lack of training, but a lack of confidence from not knowing what to say and not wanting to fail the client is a significant barrier with mental health promotion.

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To facilitate mental health screening and detection in school age children, Allison, Nativio, Mitchell, Ren, & Yuhasz (2014) utilized the Patient Health Questionnaire-9 item and the 5-item Screen for Child Anxiety Related to Emotional Disorders in identifying and referring students for treatment based on their results. Early detection is key, especially with mental health disorders because they affect a child's intrapersonal and interpersonal relationships throughout their lifespan. Screening high-risk populations such as school age children and referring them for treatment lead to an increase in positive mental health for the children affected (Nativio, Mitchell, Ren, & Yuhasz, 2014). As the literature suggests, it is critical for school nurses to place mental health as a high priority by being educated and educating others on its importance.

Mental health is a growing healthcare problem in the United States. The stigma associated with mental health and the lack of knowledge among health care workers and communities has led to millions of children affected with it to struggle to get treatment. The purpose of this study is to understand the school nurses' perspective on their role and management of mental health issues.

Methods

Overview

This study was completed after review and approval by the University of Arkansas Institutional Review Board and permission from the Arkansas School Nurses Association (ANSA) was obtained. A cross-sectional design with a survey was used to complete this study. School nurses from Arkansas were asked to participant by completing the brief survey while attending the (ASNA) meeting.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to understand the school nurses' perspective on their role and management of mental health issues.

Aims

To accomplish the purpose of this study, it was necessary to answer the following aims:

Aim 1: To determine the nurses' knowledge and comfort level with mental health issues when asked basic questions about signs and symptoms of mental health issues in school age children.

Aim 2: To determine the nurses' strategy and role in helping children suffering with mental health issues in the school setting.

Aim 3: To determine if there is a difference between nurses in different school districts in terms of their knowledge and role in helping children suffering with mental health issues in the school setting.

Research Site and Participants

The research site was at an Arkansas School Nurses Association meeting in Fayetteville, Arkansas. The meeting was made up of approximately 200 Arkansas nurses. A convenience sample of Arkansas school nurses (N = 200) participated in the research project. All participants were employed by a public-school district as a school nurse. The school districts ranged in size from 25,000 to 140 students, with the mean district size being 7,004 students. The mean number of students seen daily by the school nurse was 42, and the mean number of years of licensure held by the school nurse was 22 years. 52 school nurses reported having a Bachelor of Science in Nursing (BSN), 52 school nurses reported having an Associate of Science in Nursing (ADN), 25 reported having a Licensed Practical Nursing (LPN) degree, and 25 reported having a Diploma in Nursing. All participants were in a room awaiting a speaker led presentation regarding HIPAA.

Instrument

A survey was used to collect data on the perceived role a school nurse has in the

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management of mental health issues for the population they serve (Appendix A). The survey consisted of eight questions using a variety of survey questions such as dichotomous, opened-ended, select all that apply, and demographic survey questions. Dichotomous questions were used to prevent ambiguous answers and provide quick responses. Open-ended questions were used to define central issues without placing limits. Demographic survey questions were used to identify characteristics to better understand population that was surveyed. A researcher developed survey was reviewed by a school nurse providing face validity.

Data Collection

School nurses (N=200) completed a 10-minute paper survey at an ANSA meeting. Demographic information including number of students seen daily, total students in district, years of licensure, and type of nursing degree were among the information provided. Data was collected during a single session, June 12, 2017. Nurses were asked as a group to participate on a volunteer basis by completing the survey. Surveys were distributed and collected within a 10-minute time span. After the surveys were collected, all the data was de-identified and stored at the University of Arkansas in a locked cabinet to ensure privacy and confidentiality of the data.

Analysis and Results

Spearman's rho tests were conducted on the following variables: size of district, number of years licensed, number of roles in mental health concerns. There was a positive association between the size of district and the number of roles nurses perceived themselves having as part of the mental health team when dealing with mental health concerns, as well as the number of years licensed and the size of the district.

For the correlation between size of district and the number of roles nurses perceived themselves having as part of the mental health team when dealing with mental health concerns, the p-value

was 0.038 and r = 0.176. For the correlation between the number of years licensed and the size of district, the p-value was 0.049 and r = 0.160.

Chi-squared tests were conducted on the following variables:

> Question 1: What do you perceive as being the top mental health concern in your school?

> Question 3: What activity do you see most applicable in your role as the school nurse when dealing with mental health issues?

Question 3 degree was not significant due to a lack of a large enough sample size for a 4x4 chi-square. Only 154 participants answered question 3, and the expected value in some cells were less than 5 resulting in inaccurate results. Question 1 encountered the same issue, the question was largely skewed due to expected counts less than 5 with a total of 153 responses to the question.

Descriptive data established that 78.8% of school nurses perceived themselves to be a vital part of the mental health team. 85.6% of nurses wanted to continue their education on mental health nursing. 87.5% of nurses saw mental health as a rising issue within their school districts in need of addressing.

Results

Data was collected to determine the school nurses' knowledge and perceived role in mental health issues for the populations they serve. The results for each aim are as follows.

Aim 1: Descriptive data established that 78.8% of school nurses viewed themselves as a vital part of the team when it came to helping children with mental health problems. 85.6% of nurses felt they needed more education and were willing to further educate themselves on mental health nursing given the opportunity. Also, 87.5% of school nurses saw mental health as a rising issue within their districts.

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Figure 1:

Percentage of Yes vs No Answers from Questions 5-7
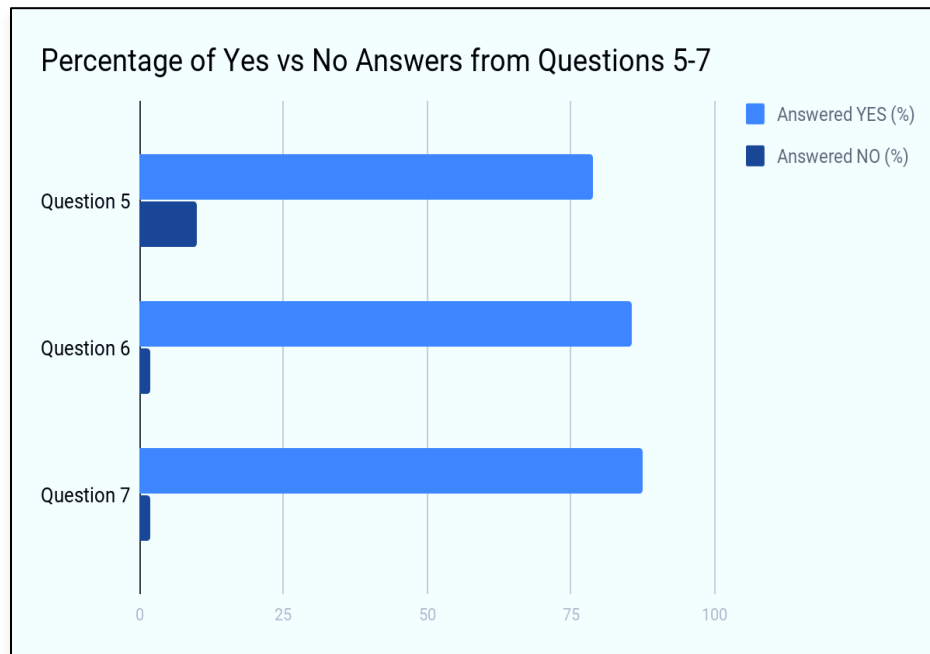
Question 5: Do you see yourself as a vital part of the team when it comes to helping children with mental health problems?

Question 6: Would you be willing to further educate yourself on Mental Health Nursing given the opportunity either through the school district or independently?

Question 7: Do you see mental health as a rising issue within your school district that needs to be addressed?

Aim 2: What mental health resources or programs are available to help students struggling with mental health problems in your district? This opened ended question was used to gather information on what programs are available and how nurses go about referring patients. Many nurses noted that they were the ones who do the counseling with students for many mental health issues. Others noted that they only referred students to in-house or local counseling agencies.

Nurses see themselves as a big part of mental health follow ups, but unfortunately that seems to be a weakness in mental health care.

Aim 3: Spearman's rho tests determined there were positive correlations so as size of district went up, years licensed and the number of roles nurses perceived themselves having as part of the mental health team when dealing with mental health concerns went up. Table 1 illustrates the positive correlation between the size of district and the number of roles nurses perceived themselves having as part of the mental health team when dealing with mental health concerns ($p = 0.038$), and the positive correlation between the number of years licensed and size of district ($p = 0.049$). So as the districts increased in size, nurses perceived themselves having a bigger role in mental health issues than those in smaller districts. Also, nurses working in bigger districts had more nursing experience than those in smaller districts.

Table 1

Spearman's rho results correlating size of district, years licensed, and number of roles in mental health concerns

Correlations between the Variables		Number of Roles in Mental Health Concerns	Size of District
Size of District	Pearson Correlation	.176*	
	p-value	.038	
	Sample Size	138	
Number of Years Licensed	Pearson Correlation	.129	.160*
	p-value	.125	.049
	Sample Size	143	151

Discussion

School nurses mainly referred patients suffering with mental health issues to contracted or local mental health counselors. The most common counseling centers patients were referred to included Ozark Guidance, Mid-South Health, and Pinnacle Pointe. Some worked directly with the students and counseled them, but that was not done in every district.

As the districts increased in size, nurses perceived themselves having a bigger role in mental health issues than those in smaller districts. Also, nurses working in bigger districts had more nursing experience than those in smaller districts. The reason for this may be because bigger

districts employ nurses with more experience since they have more students and therefore, more responsibility. Also, nurses with a significant amount of experience are more confident in their nursing skills, have improved leadership qualities, and can recognize unanticipated clinical responses. This makes them appealing to large districts who may have students enrolled with numerous physical and psychosocial comorbidities.

Limitations

Limitations that must be considered include the sample size, incomplete surveys, a single sample site, and social desirability bias. The sample size was too small causing the data to be skewed when running chi-squared and spearman's rho tests. Replication of this study using random sampling with a larger sample from the National School Nurses Association should be utilized for future research. Some of the data was missing and unreliable. There were a few surveys that had added comments that were not on the original survey, and some surveys were incomplete. The data was self-reported therefore it was not independently verified. The surveys were given to a group of nurses at one point in time. The access to nurses was limited to this one encounter. Social desirability bias may affect the results of this study because the participants knew the purpose of the study was to determine the nurses' knowledge and perceived role in mental health issues. However, the investigators encouraged participants to respond honestly and reinforced the confidentiality of the results.

Conclusions

The results from this study indicate that an overwhelming percentage of school nurses see themselves as a vital part of the mental health team, and that mental health is a rising issue within their districts that needs to be addressed. Nurses are also willing to participate in additional education about mental health to provide safe and effective nursing care to their

students. Also, nurses practicing in bigger school districts perceive themselves to have a larger role in mental health issues, and they are more experienced as opposed to nurses employed in smaller districts. Mental health is a growing concern and it is important to continue researching mental health issues within schools so that we have more data to better understand how nurses can make a positive impact. A formal needs assessment of school nurses could be useful in determining what resources are needed to support the nurses' role in mental health. Further research is needed to further investigate why children are exhibiting high percentages of ADHD and anxiety in the school setting.

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Appendix A

School Nurses' Knowledge and Perceived Role in Mental Health Issues Survey

1. What do you perceive as being the top mental health concern in your school?

2. What mental health resources or programs are available to help students struggling with mental health problems in your district?

3. What activity do you see most applicable in your role as the school nurse when dealing with mental health issues?

4. Please mark all that apply concerning your role with mental health issues

5. Do you see yourself as a vital part of the team when it comes to helping children with mental health problems?

6. Would you be willing to further educate yourself on mental health nursing if given the opportunity either through the school district or independently?

7. Do you see mental health as a rising issue within your school district that needs to be addressed?

8. Is there anything else you would like to provide concerning mental health issues and the population you serve?

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