

Vulnerable Populations: Individuals with Disabilities

Sarah Minacci

Lakeview College of Nursing

N314: Introduction to Professional Nursing

Professor Shelby Bosch

October 5, 2023

Vulnerable Populations: Individuals with Disabilities

Cultural Competence in Nursing

The United States is a beautifully diverse country filled with individuals from many different ethnic and cultural backgrounds. Therefore, it is very important as a nurse to be culturally competent. The term “culture” involves many aspects such as race, ethnicity, age, gender, religion, as well as physical, mental, and socioeconomic status (Rischer, 2022, p.84). Cultural competence on the other hand, refers to being able to examine and understand said cultural aspects while respecting the varying values, beliefs, and attitudes of different cultures (Rischer, 2022, p.84). Cultural competence does not occur overnight; it is a lifelong process that continues to develop with experience (Rischer, 2022, p.84).

As mentioned previously, cultural competence is of great importance to nursing because of the vast array of patients that nurses treat. Nurses should strive to continually work on their cultural competence so that they can help develop and provide an inclusive and friendly environment for all of their patients (Rischer, 2022, p.84). This means that nurses must respect each individual patient’s unique cultural identity. Nurses should also know that understanding their patients’ cultural beliefs can help them to create care plans that their patient is more likely to follow (Rischer, 2022, p.84). Nurses should also practice self-reflection and consider how their own cultural beliefs may be affecting the care that they give their patients (Rischer, 2022, p.84). It is important to be aware of any internal biases one may have and to be able to rise above those biases in order to create inclusive and mutual engagement between nurse and patient (Rischer, 2022, p.84). Another important aspect of cultural competence for nurses involves understanding which populations of their patients may be more vulnerable than others.

Individuals with Disabilities

One population of patients that is more vulnerable than others are individuals with disabilities. “Disability” itself does not have one clear definition. Though, generally, disability refers to having a physical or mental impairment that impedes an individual from being able to fully participate in the “normal” environment (Mitra et al., 2022). Disabilities can vary immensely; some people are born with their physical or cognitive disabilities such as Down Syndrome, Autism Spectrum Disorder, Spina Bifida, or Deafness just to name a few. Though, other people may acquire their disabilities through chronic illness or traumas such as spinal injuries after a car accident for example. Either way, it is important to note that having a disability does not automatically equate to having poor health (Mitra et al., 2022). According to the Pew Research Center, Americans with disabilities account for 13% of the total population (Leppert, 2023). Individuals with disabilities are considered a vulnerable population because they are often more susceptible to having secondary, yet preventable, health conditions that decrease their overall quality of life (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2020). Moreover, research has shown that people with disabilities are twice as likely to report having unmet healthcare needs compared to people without disabilities (Reichard, 2017). They are also more likely to experience overall poorer health outcomes and have higher rates of chronic health conditions such as obesity, diabetes, and asthma (Mitra et al., 2022). Individuals with disabilities are also at higher risk for being abused and sustaining injuries (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2020). Many of these health disparities are the result of physical and social barriers in healthcare. Such barriers could include a lack of transportation to healthcare facilities, a lack of accommodating healthcare settings and equipment, higher poverty rates of people with disabilities and internal biases or lack of knowledge among healthcare providers about

individuals with disabilities (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2020). In order to provide the best care to individuals with disabilities, health care professionals need to be aware of the varying accommodations individuals with disabilities may need. This includes ensuring the equipment in their facilities can accommodate people with disabilities such as having large enough doorways and examination rooms and modified scales/equipment and adequate assistive technologies (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2020). Health care providers must also be cognizant of how they should go about ensuring effective communication with their patients. Communication tactics will have to vary person to person considering the different types of disabilities such as deafness, intellectual disability, blindness, or speech difficulties (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2020). At the same time, it is also important that health care providers do not make sweeping generalizations and assumptions about people with disabilities. It is common for people to assume that people with disabilities are not able to live as full and as healthy lives as people without disabilities and this can affect the quality of care that they receive. (Mitra et al., 2022).

Self-Reflection

Due to the fact that I knew I wanted to pursue a career in healthcare, I felt like it was important that I better educate myself about people with disabilities because I knew that they would be some of the patients that I would help in the future. This led me to obtain a minor in Disability Studies when I attended the University of Delaware. The classes that I took for that minor really opened my eyes to the assumptions that I had about people with disabilities. In the past, I used to make assumptions about the quality of life and capabilities of individuals with disabilities. I, like many other people, was quick to assume that individuals with disabilities may not live as full of a life as myself or they may not be very capable of doing different activities. It

is shameful to admit, but there were times where I found myself surprised to hear someone with a disability was married or had a particular type of job. I think this came from the fact that growing up I was not really exposed to people with disabilities. Through elementary and high school, unfortunately, kids with disabilities were usually given their own classrooms and did not intermingle with the rest of students very much. However, after having taken the time to better educate myself about people with disabilities, I have learned that it is so important not to judge a book by its cover and to never try to assume the capability level of someone just because they have a physical or mental disability. I have also become much more aware of the barriers they often face and will work to address those barriers in my practice as a nurse.

Promotion of Social Justice

In order to better address the needs of individuals with disabilities within healthcare settings and to help prevent internal biases towards this vulnerable population, nurses should strive to promote increased social justice within the nursing profession. Social justice, in the context of healthcare, refers to fair treatment of all patients, equitable distribution of resources, and the awareness and elimination of barriers to receiving healthcare in order to promote positive health outcomes for everyone (Abu, 2020). Based off of that definition alone, it is clear that nurses are in a unique position and have an important responsibility in promoting social justice. Oftentimes, individuals with disabilities do not receive such equitable access to resources in healthcare and they certainly do not always receive the same quality of treatment as people without disabilities. Therefore, an important step in promoting increased social justice for individuals with disabilities is being aware that there are injustices present in the first place. From there, nurses can act as agents of change in many ways. Nurses can act as leaders and advocates in their place of work and speak up when they see social injustices (Oklahoma City

University, 2023). For example, this could mean that a nurse notices that the exam tables in their building cannot be modified to accommodate an individual in a wheelchair or perhaps a nurse notices that they do not have a variety of educational resources to provide to patients of varying cognitive abilities. The nurse can then go up the chain of command to address such barriers facing some of their patients and work to have them resolved. Nurses also play a crucial role in creating an inclusive and educated work environment (Oklahoma City University, 2023). This means that nurses should also speak up when they notice internal biases or a lack of inclusivity among co-workers in their workplace. Another example of how nurses can do this to promote further social justice for individuals with disabilities is to educate their co-workers about using “person-first” language. This means not using the terms “handicapped” or “disabled” and instead saying “person with a disability” and of course just using the person’s name the vast majority of the time. This helps remove the notion that an individual is reduced to just their disability and instead promotes inclusivity and viewing the person as more than their disability. Lastly, nurses can promote social justice by practicing self-reflection of potential internal biases and by simply demonstrating civility, respect, and compassion to all of their patients regardless of disability status.

References

Abu V. K. (2020). Let us be Unequivocal about Social Justice in Nursing. *Nurse Education in Practice*, 47, 102849. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.nepr.2020.102849>

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2020, September 15). *Disability and Health Information for Healthcare Providers*. Disability and Health Promotion. <https://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/disabilityandhealth/hcp.html>

Leppert, R. (2023, July 24). *8 Facts about Americans with Disabilities*. Pew Research Center. <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2023/07/24/8-facts-about-americans-with-disabilities/#:~:text=Overall%2C%20there%20are%20about%2042.5,care%20or%20independent%20living%20difficulties.>

Mitra, M., Long-Bellil, L., Moura, I., Miles, A., & Kaye, H. S. (2022). Advancing Health Equity and Reducing Health Disparities for People with Disabilities in the United States. *Health Affairs*, 41(10), 1379–1386. <https://doi.org/10.1377/hlthaff.2022.00499>

Oklahoma City University. (2023, May 24). *How Does Social Justice Relate to Nursing?*. Oklahoma City University. <https://www.okcu.edu/nursing/blog/p/how-does-social-justice-relate-to-nursing/#:~:text=Clinical%20social%20justice%20methods,plans%20to%20address%20the%20needs.>

Reichard, A., Stransky, M., Phillips, K., McClain, M., & Drum, C. (2017). Prevalence and Reasons for Delaying and Foregoing Necessary Care by the Presence and Type of

Disability Among Working-Age Adults. *Disability and Health Journal*, 10(1), 39–47.

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.dhjo.2016.08.001>

Rischer, K. (2022). *Think like a nurse: Laying the foundation for professional practice*

(Vol.1). KeithRN, Anoka, MN.