

Vulnerable Populations

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Access to quality healthcare can be difficult for certain populations around the globe. In the United States alone, there are millions of people that make up some part of a vulnerable population. Some of these populations include, but are not limited to ethnic minorities, the LGBTQ+ community, homeless or low income, elderly, and military veterans (CSU, 2024). In healthcare, especially in nursing, it is important to treat each patient with respect regardless of their culture, background, or population. Vulnerable populations may run into issues such as lack of transportation, lack of health education and other factors. Larger cities in the United States tend to have more of a diverse patient population, with the vulnerable being included however, patients who live in very rural areas may have a difficult time if they are required to travel a far distance to receive quality healthcare.

The LGBTQ+ population has increased almost double, which presents a much larger vulnerable population than years ago. According to Cleveland State University, “LGBTQ+ individuals face an elevated risk for a range of health challenges compared to the general population. These risks encompass substance use, sexually transmitted infections (STIs), cancers, cardiovascular diseases, obesity, as well as increased vulnerability to bullying, isolation, rejection, anxiety, depression and suicidal tendencies” (CSU, 2024). The LGBTQ+ population includes transgender patients, which have long received prejudice and discrimination when seeking out healthcare. Law officials in several states have made it especially difficult for transgender patients to gain the access to healthcare that they need.

Schwend states that gender transition is labeled as a mental disorder in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, for the chapter “Mental and Behavioral Disorders” (Schwend, 2020). This presents a very real problem, as some countries are continuing to label

trans people as mentally incompetent to make their own health decisions. Along with the mental health diagnoses, trans people are being forced to attend curative therapies that aim to modify or change their gender identity. In other countries, transgender and LGBTQ+ patients still face legal implications for their sexual orientation. An article from the American Bar Association states that in a survey conducted in 2022, transgender people of color were more likely to receive inappropriate backlash and discrimination as opposed to their white transgender counterparts.

As nurses, we are called to serve the population in their most vulnerable times, and that includes LGBTQ+ and transgender patients. Nurses can help to create an inclusive and welcoming environment for these patients, advocate for their rights, and ensure their trust in healthcare providers. With this comes along the act of social justice in nursing and how important it is. Oklahoma City University defines social justice as “the fair treatment and equitable status of all individuals and social groups within a state or society” (OCU, 2023). This definition applies to all patients and populations in healthcare, regardless of socio-economic status, race, gender or sexual orientation. Nurses are held to a higher standard and taught to practice under a Code of Ethics produced by the American Nurses Association. There are 9 different provisions in the nursing code of ethics, all of them explain how nurses should provide fair and equal treatment to each patient, collaborate with other healthcare providers and practice social justice (Haddad, 2023).

According to an Oklahoma City University nursing blog, Provision number 8 in the nursing code of ethics is further divided up into four different parts that focus on other important responsibilities. These include 1. Health is a Universal Right 2. Collaboration for Health, Human Rights and Health Diplomacy 3. Obligation to Advance Health and Human Rights and Reduce

Disparities and 4. Collaboration for Human Rights in a Complex, Extreme or Extraordinary Practice Setting (OCU, 2023).

Along with social justice, another very important value that nurses are taught to uphold is cultural competence. Cultural Competence is defined as the capacity or skill to provide equal care to patients of diverse cultural groups. This includes patients with different beliefs, values and practices (Deering, J.D. & Harris, 2024). As a nurse, it is important to think about one's own cultural practices and reflect on how that may affect the care they provide. When there are language barriers in healthcare, nurses and other providers will use interpreters to effectively communicate with the patient and the patient's family. This is just one example of how medical teams can make patients feel welcome and included, in hopes that the patient feels at ease in trusting their providers. Patients who have had bad past experiences may be reluctant to seek care, even in an emergency, and this can cause a decline in the patient's health. It is important for nurses to take time with each patient and provide the patient with education on how to better their health outside of the hospital or clinical setting.

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