

ORIGINAL RESEARCH

Participation in an online journal club as a career ladder activity

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this descriptive study was to determine if participation in an online journal club increased the understanding of the research process and its impact on evidence based practice. Participant data from 78 volunteer participants were content analyzed. Results reflect a gradual ability to critically review the article under critique, and a mastery of the process. As one of several activities available within the Career Ladder, the online journal club was perceived a valuable, as evidenced by a 50% participation rate. Online journal club activities will continue to be offered at the study site, and may be used as a Career Ladder opportunity.

Key Words: Journal club, Career ladder, Online

1. INTRODUCTION

Journal clubs, when utilized among nurses employed in clinical settings, enhance the ability to translate research findings into clinical practice. According to Aitken and colleagues,^[1] understanding research, and being able to evaluate it in relation to the clinical practice setting, is critical in providing evidenced-based nursing. Academic knowledge of how to locate and critique a research article is one step in the process. Evaluating the research, in relation to the clinical setting and the patient population, assures that any planned intervention aligns with the patient's values and is a proper use of resources. Thus, when empirical knowledge, attained from the research, and inductive knowledge, gained from clinical experience, are combined, evidenced-based care becomes best practices, for the clinical setting. Journal clubs have been identified as a strategy to promote evidenced-based practice.^[2] The purpose of this feasibility study was to de-

termine the effect an online journal club had on professional development among staff nurses.

2. JOURNAL CLUB

Results from a systematic review of the literature^[3] identified 4 main categories of journal clubs, which include organization, conduct of meetings, influencing factors, and intervention outcomes. Within the profession of nursing, journal clubs are used in academic settings to expose students to identifying, locating, and critiquing published research. In practice, the notion that journal clubs facilitate research utilization and promote evidenced-based nursing was initially demonstrated by Kirchhoff and Beck.^[4] Results from a critical review of the literature by Rogers^[5] determined that journal clubs improve participants' familiarization with studies and increases confidence in the application of research results to clinical practice. These results were replicated by

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Gardner and associates in 2016.^[6]

Typically, participation in a journal club is an additional activity, schedule outside one's normal work schedule, and guided by a Nurse Research or Nurse Evidenced Based Committee. The governance structure of this committee should be voluntary, and include both administrative and staff nurses with research experience, individuals interested in developing or participating in quality improvement or a research study. The Committee should be chaired by an experienced nurse researcher, typically with an advanced degree, whose primary job responsibility is clinically-focused, rather than administrative.^[6]

Journal club membership or completion of journal club activities has been utilized as a professional development requirement for a Career Ladder program. Career Ladder programs, while voluntary, provide educational opportunities for Career advancement for staff nurses, while remaining as direct care providers. Career Ladders have served as recruitment, retention, and job satisfaction interventions.^[7,8] The specific content of any Career Ladder is specific to the organization.

Providing the journal club in a web-based, online, asynchronous format overcomes time and geographical barriers. Thus, participation is not restrained. The electric format allows members to access the journal club website at any time, and from any geographical location. As clinical nurses, their required annual competency training and any self-paced educational program provided at the study site use the same arrangement, thus they had familiarity with this format.

3. TRANSLATION OF RESEARCH INTO PRACTICE

According to Polit and Beck,^[9] nursing research provides a scholarly and scientific framework capable of guiding practice. Evidence-based practice, or EBP, can be traced back to Florence Nightingale, and her use of data to guide care practices.^[10] In a review article, Lachance^[11] performed a literature review which summarized the benefits of nursing journal clubs. Synthesizing the results of the 20 articles selected for this review, Lachance^[11] concluded that there are numerous benefits associated with journal club participation. Keeping current with new research and using EBP to guide nursing care was the most frequently cited benefit. Subsequent benefits, in order of cited frequency, include developing skills in the ability to critically read and appraise research, bridging the gap between research and clinical practice, and promoting interdisciplinary collaboration, team building, and professional discussions. Data, specific to the impact nursing journal clubs have on health care organizations, include reforming policies and identifying gaps in clinical practice

knowledge.

Despite the benefits associated with participation in a journal club, attendance has been identified as a major barrier.^[12] This was the experience at the study site. Journal club participation was available only as a face-to-face activity prior to this online option. When available only in this format, participation included two individuals, both held administrative positions, where attending a workday, daytime meeting was feasible. Thus, time and work responsibilities impeded the ability to participate in a journal club, making it a less-than-desirable Career Ladder activity option.

Based on the evidence, a decision was made to revise the journal club into an online format. The evidence indicates that the benefits of journal clubs are numerous. Web-based educational sessions are already available at the study site, thus there was some familiarity with web-based online activities. It was hypothesized that altering the format would increase participation, which would ultimately improve the ability to provide EBP.

4. THE CAREER LADDER

A Career Ladder, initially described by Benner in 1982,^[13] posits that nurses who provide direct patient care develop expert skills over time and as a result of a multitude of experiences. Using the Dreyfus Model of Skill Acquisition, Benner defined five stages that a nurse progresses when becoming an expert in clinical practice. These stages begin with a focus on tasks, and end with an intuitive grasp of an entire clinical scenario along with the experience to focus on relevant concerns.

At the study site, Career Ladder opportunities have been available for clinical nurses since 2008. The American Nurses Credentialing Center (ANCC)^[14] definition of a clinical nurse is one who spends the majority of his or her time providing direct patient care is used as inclusion criteria to participate in the Career Ladder. Eligibility for the Career Ladder includes (1) a minimum of one-year experience beyond orientation, (2) worked at least 1000 hours in the calendar year prior to application, (3) without active disciplinary action, and (4) achieved a satisfactory annual evaluation. Steps within the Ladder (categories) and levels provide the opportunity for nurses to remain direct care providers, yet be recognized and compensated for their clinical expertise. There are seven categories of activities within the Career Ladder. These include (1) leadership, (2) education of others, (3) quality, (4) community, (5) research, and (6) professional development. Points toward Career Ladder advancement are provided incrementally, for (7) years of service beyond five, and in five-year increments.

Advancing up the Career Ladder occurs when completion of described activities, within selected categories, is completed. The RN is allowed to select activities within three preferred categories. There are seven categories within the Career Ladder (leadership, education of others, quality, community, new knowledge and innovation [research], professional development, and years of service). Six of the categories require the completion and verification of specific activities for upward movement to occur; points within the seventh category are earned through years of service at the study site. Thus, RNs attempting to achieve the initial level (Level 1) must achieve a total of 20 points from within their three selected categories. Achieving a Level 2 status requires additional

points while increasing the potential categories to four. Additional requirements include a minimum number of years of experience or academic degrees or certification in a specific specialty. Achieving a Level 3 requires a minimum of 40 points within six areas and a higher level of education, certification, or years of nursing experience. A financial incentive associated with each Level is provided annually, with the dollar amount correlated to the Level earned. While advancement may not occur annually, an application demonstrating continued involvement, must be submitted to earn the financial incentive each year. Exemplars for each of the six categories are displayed in Table 1.

Table 1. Exemplars from each of the six career ladder categories

Category	Details/Required Verification	Points
Leadership	Membership in a Nursing Committee	Up to 4
Education of Others	Develop and Display an Educational Poster	Up to 1
Quality	Assists with a Quality Improvement Project	Up to 2
Community	Participate in the Flu Shot Program	Up to 1
New Knowledge and Innovation	Complete a Journal Club Critique	Up to 1
Professional Development	Obtain or Maintain Specialty Certification	Up to 6
Years of Service	Between 5 and 9 Years of Service at the Study Site	Up to 1

5. ONLINE JOURNAL CLUB

Participation in the Online Journal Club at the study site is voluntary, and open to nurses (RNs) or graduate nurses (GNs) employed within any clinical area. Individuals choosing to participate in the Online Journal Club as a Career Ladder activity must secure approval from their unit manager. The Journal Club is organizational-based, rather than unit-based. This format was chosen based on the lack of personnel and expertise to sustain a unit-based Journal Club. This format also provides a framework for nurses to network and develop professional relationships with nurses from other Career areas. To initiate participation, any RN or GN simply registers on the website, which then provides the article under review and the activities necessary to complete the critique. Participation in the Journal Club, for the purpose of completing a Career Ladder step, is within the research category. Completing a critique of the research article posted provides up to 2 points toward the meeting the requirement of any Career Ladder level.

Once accepted into the Online Journal Club, and email is sent from the Administrator overseeing the activity. This email provides access to the article under review, the timeline in which activities must be completed, and the link to the survey discussion questions. There are six opportunities

each year to complete the Online Journal Club activity, with each opportunity available for a calendar month. Articles are selected by the Nursing Research and Innovation Council and aligned with current trends or clinical interests expressed by direct care providers.

Altering the Journal Club to an online format, allowing nurses from any clinical are to participate, providing a global focus to the article under review, and linking Journal Club participation to the Career Ladder increased participation in this activity. In an effort to assess this the Online Journal Club experience, non-identifiable data were captured reflecting participation.

6. THE STUDY AND RESULTS

Participatory data, routinely maintained by the Online Journal Website, were reviewed once one year's data were available. These data were reviewed to determine overall participation, participation to meet a Career Ladder requirement, and total time required for completion of the Online Journal Club critique activity. Comments within the critique were content analyzed by the administrative overseer for accuracy, appropriateness, and reflective of the article's intent.

There were 78 participants in the initial Online Journal Club activity. Each participant read the article under review, and

completed the discussion board questions. The number of participants increased to 109 for the second activity, with 122 completing the review of the third article posted. Comparing these participation numbers to the number of nurses who applied for a Career Ladder review during the year reveals that, of the 214 nurses approved for possible Career Ladder progression, 107 completed the Online Journal Club requirement. This calculates to 50% of nurses electing to use Online Journal Club activities as one of their promotion criteria.

Content analyses of the discussion board postings are collated and by the administrator, who removes all identifying data. Exemplars of the postings include (1) "I was not aware of the adverse effects of this treatment – it has not been my experience" and (2) "I believe we need to change our policy to include more frequent assessments". The greatest number of postings reflected an unawareness of the topic, followed by reflective summaries related to the ability to become comfortable with critiquing the work of others, and determining if the conclusions were appropriate for the patients who received care at the study site. Then, responses are shared with members of the Nursing Research and Innovation Council. Ensuing discussion surrounds the knowledge base of the participants and changes to enhance the learning, application of the research, or increase participation. Sharing the results of the analysis may occur at the unit level when application of the critique may be appropriate. In general, the content of the critiques reflects an improved critical analyses, and an increased comfort with being critical of the article. The length of the postings also increased and began to include the ability, or inability, of the research results to be implemented at the study site.

7. IMPLICATIONS FOR NURSING

The results of the change of format, broadening the scope of the article under review, and linking Journal Club participation to the Career Ladder improved both the number of participants and the quality of the activity. While it is impossible to identify the contribution of each intervention, we posit that these occurring together, rather than separately, improved participation.

Providing Journal Club activities using an online format increased the ability of staff nurses to participate. The Online format, while password protected, is accessible from any computer, making participation available 24/7/365. Participation does not have to occur while at work, or require coming to the study site while off-duty. The ability to read the article under review, provide your thoughts and read the thoughts of others. Additional postings demonstrate critical thinking and provides a forum for discussion, during a time convenient to the participant.

Identifying an article of interest to nurses, regardless of their clinical area, increased the generalizability of the activity, which may have improved participation. Nurses, either new to their clinical site, or with years of experience within their clinical site, may be less interested in specific research. Novice nurses to the clinical area may not feel prepared to participate, while experts may be uninterested in the activity. The limited number of nurses from any specific clinical area, may have impacted participation prior to these interventions. Widening the focus of the article may have made the activity more attractive.

Linking Journal Club activity, in any format, to a Career Ladder should improve participation. At the study site, participation in the Online Journal Club is now available six times annually. Increasing the number of offerings provide additional opportunities to participate in this activity. Adding a tangible outcome to any activity improves participation. The format of the Career Ladder at the study site includes maintaining participation in several scholarly activities, thus Journal Club participation should be sustainable.

Further research is needed and should focus on linking Journal Club activities to changes in healthcare interventions as well as assessing the long-term effects of critiquing research. The ability to provide evidence-based care requires the capability to locate, critically read, and implement changes in clinical practice when appropriate. This skill set is a consequence of participation in Journal Club activities.

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST DISCLOSURE

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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