

## ORIGINAL RESEARCH

# Nurses' attitude towards the care of the elderly: Implications for gerontological nursing training

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## Abstract

**Background:** Nurses are in contact with the elderly at different levels of care. However, observations show that relational gaps exist resulting in negative elderly patients' outcomes. This study aimed at exploring the attitude of nurses towards the care of the elderly in two selected hospitals (University College Hospital and Ring Road State hospital) in Ibadan, Oyo state.

**Methods:** The study was a descriptive survey. Questionnaire was administered to randomly selected and consented 130 nurses in the two selected hospitals and was retrieved immediately after being completed. The questionnaires had five sections. Section A covered socio-demographic data. Section B, C and D consisted of questions which explored respondents' attitude towards the care of elderly; staffing ratio and care of the elderly; factors influencing care of the elderly and Section E questions were on knowledge of aging process. The completed questionnaire was coded and analyzed using frequencies and percentages

**Result:** This study shows that 73.0% of the respondents agreed that elderly are difficult to care for. Over 80% agreed that effective care of the elderly requires special training. Also, more than 90% believed hospitals should have special wards (geriatric ward) for effective care of the elderly. Respondents showed positive attitude towards the care of the elderly and good knowledge of aging process.

**Conclusion:** Effective care of the elderly requires special training, provision of geriatric ward, adequate staffing to reduce stress and improve quality care. There is need for continuing education on quality care to improve nursing practice in the care of the elderly.

## Key words

Care of the elderly, Nurses' attitude, Training needs, Nigeria

## 1 Introduction

The population of the elderly is increasing in all countries of the World. This is attributed to be one of the major achievements of mankind in the modern era<sup>[1]</sup>.

Globally, there are an estimated 605 million people aged 60 years and above<sup>[2,3]</sup>. According to Troisi<sup>[4]</sup>, one out of every ten persons is 60 years or above. By 2050, one out of five will be 60 years or older and by 2150, one out of three persons

will be 60 years or older<sup>[4]</sup>. Troisi<sup>[4]</sup> further stated that the older population is ageing, that is, the oldest old (80 years or older) is the fastest growing segment – constituting 11 percent of the 60 years or older age group- and this is projected to grow to 19 percent by 2050. The number of centenarians is projected to increase 15-fold from approximately 145,000 in 1999 to 2.2 million by 2050.

Although the population of the elderly is increasing in all countries of the world, until the early 80s, the demographic transition was mostly viewed as a phenomenon of the developed countries<sup>[4, 5]</sup>. Literature has however shown that the great majority (two-thirds) of those over 60 years of age live in the developing world; and that the proportion is rising steadily and will reach nearly three-quarters by the 2030s<sup>[5]</sup>.

In Nigeria, the proportion of the aged population has been increasing. Before Nigeria's independence in 1960, there was a population census conducted in 1952/53. The total number of persons aged 50 years and above in this census was 2,448,000. In 1963 and 1991 population censuses, the total number of persons aged 50 years and above was 3,617,000 and 8,227,782 respectively<sup>[6]</sup>.

Improvement in health care facilities has brought about longevity which is considered as one of the greatest achievement of the 20th century<sup>[3]</sup>. With increasing age however, there are also many health problems, often chronic, which the elderly have to cope with. These include, inter alia, musculoskeletal disorders, hypertension, diabetes mellitus, gastritis/gastric ulcer<sup>[3]</sup>. These diseases often require hospitalization in health care facilities, where they are cared for by nurses and other health care providers.

Studies carried out since the 1950s have identified negative attitudes of registered nurses and nursing students toward geriatric nursing and other work with older patients. These attitudes have prevailed into the 1990s and highlight the low status associated with working with older patients<sup>[7]</sup>. Mellor<sup>[8]</sup> however, stated that the literature suggests that nurses in acute care hospitals have overall, slightly positive attitudes toward elderly people. Some authors also found that nurses' age, years of nursing experience, and qualification level had no bearing on their attitudes toward older people<sup>[9-11]</sup>.

Since the elderly constitute an increasing proportion of Nigeria's population and of hospital admission, it is important to examine the attitude of nurses towards the care of the elderly so as to better focus nursing education towards optimum care of hospitalized elders. This is even more pertinent since the elderly are not cared for in special wards (geriatric wards) but on general wards. Nurses may be left feeling coerced into working in an area that is considered either undesirable<sup>[12, 14]</sup>, or outside their current educational and practical knowledge<sup>[14]</sup>. Anecdotal observations revealed neglect, poor quality care and attention given to achieve the desired needs of the elderly. It is against this background that this study was designed to explore nurses' attitude towards the care of the elderly.

### Research questions

- (1) What are nurses' attitudes towards the care of elderly?
- (2) What is the perceived effect of staffing ratio on the care of the elderly?
- (3) What are the factors influencing the attitude of nurses in the care of the elderly?
- (4) What do nurses' Know about aging process?

## 2 Materials and method

The descriptive (cross sectional) study was carried out in medical and surgical wards at University College Hospital and Adeoyo Ring Road State Hospital, in Ibadan.

The University College Hospital (UCH) is a tertiary institution founded in the year 1954, located in Queen Elizabeth Road, Oritamefa, Ibadan. It is a research, training and service centre for all health professions and all health care needs for all age groups. The total number of nurses on all the wards was about 1000 at the time of data collection.

Adeoyo Ring Road Hospital, Ibadan is a state hospital. There were 170 nurses in the hospital. They attend to all cases of Medical, Surgical problems, as well as Accident and Emergency.

## 2.1 Sampling technique

The nurses were stratified according to their cadres this was followed by simple random technique in selecting respondents from each cadre of nurses. Using this method, a sample of 100 registered nurses from medical and surgical wards UCH was selected. At Adeoyo Ring road hospital, 30 registered nurses were selected for the study.

## 2.2 Instrument

The instrument for the study was a 30 – item questionnaire developed by the researchers after extensive literature review. The questionnaires had five sections. Section A focused on socio-demographic data. Section B, C and D consisted of questions which explored respondents' attitude towards the care of elderly; nurse-patient ratio and care of the elderly; factors influencing care of the elderly and Section E was on knowledge of aging process.

A test retest was carried out to ensure the reliability of the instrument. Ten (10) copies of the questionnaire were distributed to nurses in a mission hospital and the same number of questionnaire was re-administered two weeks after the first administration and the results compared to ensure that it measured what was intended consistently. A statistical reliability test was also done and a Cronsbach's alpha score of 0.82 was obtained.

## 2.3 Data collection

Ethical approval was obtained from the UI / UCH Institutional Review Committee and from the two hospitals before data was collected. On each ward, the roster was used as the sampling frame. One nurse (nth) in every three nurses was selected in each cadre. Where the nth nurse refused to participate/unavailable, the researchers moved on. Individual informed consent was taken from each respondent. The questionnaire was then administered to the respondents and same retrieved after completion in each ward of the selected hospitals. Data was collected in 6 weeks.

## 2.4 Analysis of data

The completed questionnaire was coded and subjected to statistical analysis using statistical package for social sciences (SPSS) version 16.

# 3 Results

## Socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents and categories of elderly patients preferred as patients

Table 1 shows the frequency distribution of the socio demographic characteristics of the respondents. In all, One hundred and thirty nurses participated in the study. 25(19.2%) were aged between 21-25 years, 52(40.0%) were aged between 26-30 years, 27(20.8%) were aged between 31-35 years, while 26 (20.0%) were older than or equal to 36 years. More than 75% (n=93) were married; 86(66.2%) were Christians while 44(33.8%) practiced Islam; and over 85% of the respondents (n=112) were of the Yoruba ethnic tribe. Exactly half the number of respondents were registered nurses and /midwives, while 32.3% were registered nurses, and the remaining 17.7% had a Bachelor of Nursing Science in addition to being Registered nurses and midwives.

None of the respondents will like to care solely for male elderly patients while most (86.9%) of the participants would like to care for both male and female elderly patients. When asked about the age group of elderly patient they would like to care for, none of the nurses wanted to care for patients older than 95 years while 65(60.2%) preferred patients between ages 65-74 years (the young old).

**Table 1.** Socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents

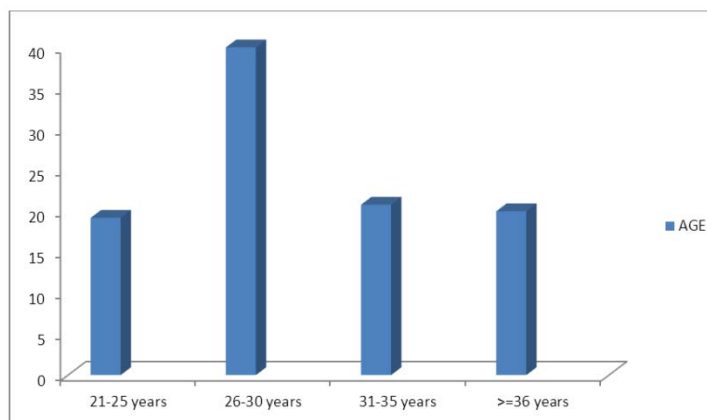
Variable	Frequency	Percentage (%)
<b>Age</b>		
21-25 years	25	19.2
26-30 years	52	40.0
31-35 years	27	20.8
>=36 years	26	20.0
<b>Marital Status</b>		
Married	93	76.9
Single	28	23.1
<b>Religion</b>		
Christianity	86	66.2
Islam	44	33.8
<b>Professional qualification</b>		
Registered Nurse	42	32.3
Registered Nurse/Midwife	65	50.0
BNSc	27	17.7
<b>Tribe</b>		
Yoruba	112	86.2
Igbo	18	13.8
<b>Years of Experience</b>		
1-5 years	18	13.8
6-10 years	29	22.3
11-15 years	48	36.9
16-20 years	23	17.7
>=21 years	12	9.2
<b>Professional Cadre</b>		
ADN	5	3.8
CNO	15	11.5
ACNO	20	15.4
PNO	24	18.5
SNO	19	14.6
NO I	22	16.9
NO II	25	19.2
<b>Categories of elderly patient that you would like to care for by gender</b>		
Male	0	0.0
Female	17	13.1
Both	113	86.9
<b>Categories of elderly patient that you would like to care for: by age</b>		
Young old(65-74)	65	60.2
Middle old(75-84)	25	23.1
Old old (85-94)	18	16.7
Oldest old(> 95)	0	0.0

### Attitude of nurses towards the care of the elderly

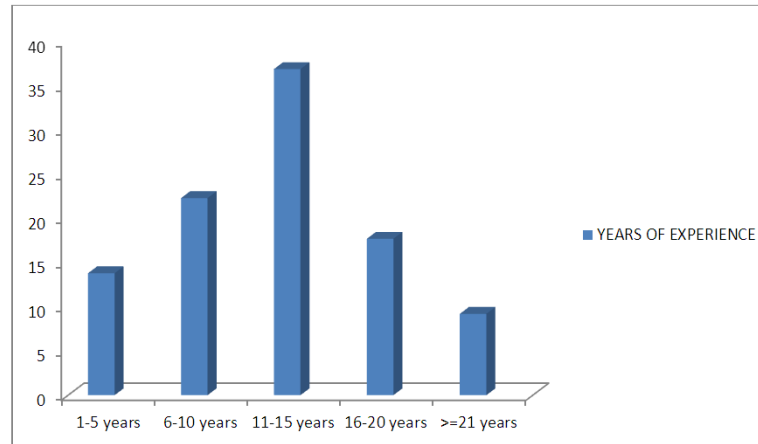
The result displayed in table 2 shows that the nurses had a fairly high positive attitude towards the care of elderly patients. They all agreed to feel good about care of elderly patients, though almost all of them (96.0%) felt that it was time consuming. All the respondents also disagreed that elderly people do not deserve the care that nurses give them. Ninety-five (73.0%) disagreed that taking care of elderly patients will not give them room to attend to other clients. Over 90% of the respondents agreed that the older the elderly the more demanding he/she becomes. As regards whether time should not be wasted on elderly patients with terminal illnesses, forty - eight (36.9%) agreed to this, while the remaining eighty two (63.1%) disagreed.

**Table 2.** Attitude of nurses towards the care of the elderly

ITEMS	Strongly Agree n (%)	Agree n(%)	Strongly Disagree n(%)	Disagree n(%)
I feel good taking care of the elderly	65(50.0)	65(50.0)	0(0.0)	0(0.0)
I see the care of elderly patients as being time consuming	22(16.9)	104(80.0)	4(3.1)	0(0.0)
I prefer giving attention to younger patients than elderly ones	12(11.7)	31(30.1)	26(25.2)	34(33.0)
The older the elderly the more demanding he/she becomes	65(50.0)	56(43.1)	9(6.9)	0(0.0)
The elderly are difficult to care for	12(9.2)	83(63.8)	18(13.8)	17(13.1)
Caring for the elderly does not give room for other clients	35(26.9)	0(0.0)	44(33.8)	51(39.2)
The older the elderly the more demanding he/she becomes	56(46.3)	47(38.8)	18(14.9)	0(0.0)
Time should not be wasted on elderly patients with terminal illnesses	13(10.0)	35(26.9)	56(43.1)	26(20.0)
The elderly do not deserve the care nurses give them	0(0.0)	0(0.0)	0(0.0)	130(0.0)
Some elderly look untidy and dirty and as such I do not like caring for them	4(3.1)	0(0.0)	88(67.7)	38(29.2)
The elderly can often provoke the care giver	30(23.1)	69(53.1)	22(16.9)	9(6.9)



**Figure 1.** Age of respondents



**Figure 2.** Respondents' years of experience

### Effect of low nurse-patient ratio on the care of the elderly

The study further highlighted the opinion of the nurses on the effect that nurse-patient ratio has on their job performance and the care of elderly people. More than 90% of the nurses stated that inadequate staffing can result in unimaginable workload and stress leading to low standard of care. They also agreed that adequate staffing increases quality of work, job productivity, and job satisfaction. All the respondents stated that shortage of nursing staff would have a negative effect on the care given to the elderly people because there will be reduced therapeutic conversation, inadequate information and education about their health status.

Most of the nurses (93.1%) were also of the opinion that specific services such as assisted bath and ambulation for an elderly patient cannot be adequately provided with inadequate staffing.

**Table 3.** Effect of low nurse-patient ratio on the care of the elderly

ITEM	SA (%)	A (%)	SD (%)	D (%)
Inadequate staffing can result in unimaginable workload and stress.	86(66.2)	35(26.9)	9(6.9)	0(0.0)
Adequate staffing increases quality of work, job productivity, and job satisfaction.	105(80.8)	21(16.2)	4(3.1)	0(0.0)
Inadequate staffing can result in low standard of care.	86(66.2)	44(33.8)	0(0.0)	0(0.0)
Therapeutic conversation with elderly patients is greatly reduced when there is shortage of staff.	73(56.2)	57(43.8)	0(0.0)	0(0.0)
The swift expansion of the elderly population and limited budgets could result in the reduction of staffing levels.	38(31.4)	57(47.1)	26(21.5)	0(0.0)
Inadequate staffing services can increase the proportion of fragile elderly.	18(16.1)	69(61.6)	25(22.3)	0(0.0)
Specific services such as assisted bath, ambulation for an elderly patient could not be adequately provided with inadequate staffing	74(56.9)	47(36.2)	0(0.0)	9(6.9)
Shortage of staff affects provision of adequate information and education to elderly patient.	56(43.1)	52(40.0)	4(3.1)	18(13.8)

### Factors influencing the attitude of nurses towards care of the elderly

As shown in table 4, 80% of the respondents agreed that the major factor that influence their attitude towards provision of adequate care to the elderly are the special training required of them. All the respondents felt that special wards ought to be available for caring for elderly patients. Moreover, the nurses also felt that the mental status of elderly patients; diverse

behavioural exhibitions of the elderly patients such as difficulty in persuading them and reluctances about their care in the hospital are major hindrances towards effective care of the elderly in Nigeria.

**Table 4.** Factors influencing the attitude of nurses in towards care of the elderly

ITEM	SA (%)	A (%)	SD (%)	D (%)
Effective care of the elderly requires special training	31(23.8)	73(56.2)	17(13.1)	9(6.9)
Hospitals should have special wards i.e geriatric wards for effective care of the elderly.	66(50.8)	64(49.2)	0(0.0)	0(0.0)
The health care policy of Nigeria has made the care of the elderly difficult.	61(46.9)	43(33.1)	17(13.1)	9(6.9)
Mental status of the elderly patients affects their care and decision making.	39(30.0)	91(70.0)	0(0.0)	0(0.0)
Elderly patients exhibit different behaviours which affect their care	70(57.4)	52(42.6)	0(0.0)	0(0.0)
It is difficult to persuade and convince reluctant patient about their care in the hospital	13(10.0)	104(80.0)	4(3.1)	9(6.9)
Some elderly are abandoned due to lack of social support.	56(43.1)	52(40.0)	9(6.9)	13(10.0)

### Knowledge of nurses about aging process

Table 5 provides results on the above. Generally, the nurses had a very high knowledge of aging process and the response of elderly patients to hospitalization. 126(96.9%) accepted the fact that decline of mental power and dementia common with old people may affect their coping ability. 112(86.2%) agreed that decreased mental ability of elderly patient often caused by aging process and illness affect response to care. More than 90% of the respondents stated that assessment and evaluation is needed for effective care of the elderly even in emergency situations; that nutritional assessment should be an integral part of the clinical examination of elderly patient; and that aging process will lead to anatomical and physiological changes.

**Table 5.** Knowledge of nurses about aging process

Questions	Yes (%)	No (%)
Decreased mental ability of elderly patient often caused by aging process and illness affect response to care.	112(86.2)	18(13.8)
Assessment and evaluation are needed for effective care	126(96.9)	4(3.1)
There should be thorough assessment of patients even in emergency	121(93.1)	9(6.9)
Aging process will lead to anatomical and physiological changes	121(93.1)	9(6.9)
Nutritional assessment should be an integral part of the clinical examination of elderly patient.	121(93.1)	9(6.9)
Average score	121.8(93.4)	7.5(5.8)

## 4 Discussion

Gerontological nursing is not yet a popular specialty in Nigeria. Most (80%) of the nurses who took part in this study felt that effective care of the elderly requires special training. This supports the assertion made by Wertheimer<sup>[9]</sup>, who stated that training - courses for non-professionals and professionals is an approach adopted by world health organization through primary health care to meet the needs of the elderly in the society.

Majority of the respondents also believed that hospitals should have special wards i.e. geriatric ward for effective care of elderly people. This is in line with the findings of Pursy<sup>[10]</sup> who stated that nurses will have more access to old people if kept in special wards and as such may develop interests in them. Courtney<sup>[11]</sup> also stated that nurses believed the elderly are better cared for in old people's homes.

Most of the respondents expressed feeling good about the care of the elderly. This may not be unconnected with the cultural disposition of Nigerians about their elderly ones. However, they also stated that caring for the elderly is time

consuming, difficult and more demanding than caring for other categories of patients. Factors associated with the difficulty in caring for elderly include 'the elderly looks untidy'; poor staffing and having too much work to do. Some nurses also gave reasons of behavioural change in the elderly as a cause of undesirability of geriatric nursing. Overall, these factors indicate negative attitude towards caring for the elderly on the part of respondents. In a study involving ward managers, registered nurses, public health nurses, healthcare assistants, and student nurses, working in a rural community, Doherty, Mitchell, and O'Neill<sup>[15]</sup> also found a positive attitude.

Hope<sup>[16]</sup> also found a positive attitude towards the care of the elderly among nurses working in acute care in general medical units and those working in acute care in aged care units. Tierney et al.<sup>[17]</sup> also found a positive attitude among a group of orthopaedic nurses. Furthermore, Mellor, Chew and Greenhill<sup>[18]</sup> found a positive attitude towards the care of the elderly among nurses in a multi - purpose health care in Australia. It must also be stated that Nolan, Davis, and Brown<sup>[19]</sup> asserted that attitudes can be negatively influenced by the under resourced care environments experienced when working with older people.

Regarding knowledge of aging process including the attendant structural and physiological changes, most of the nurses demonstrated adequate knowledge. The respondents were also able to identify the need for adequate assessment of the elderly at all settings where they present for treatment. Some authors however, found a low level of knowledge of geriatric care among nurses<sup>[18, 20]</sup>.

## 5 Conclusion

In conclusion, the study shows that nurses have a negative attitude towards the care of the elderly even though they displayed a fairly good knowledge of geriatric care. The study also identified some of the causes of the poor attitude, and these include, among others, poor staffing, difficulty in caring for the elderly and behavioural changes in the elderly. This point to training needs of the nurses in gerontological nursing.

## 6 Limitation of the study

The study was carried out in a low/poor resource country hence the major thrust of its limitations.

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