

Evolution of Care: A Critical Comparison Between Evidence Based Practice and Traditional Nursing Approaches

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Abstract

The transition from traditional nursing practice to Evidence Based Practice represents one of the most significant shifts in the history of the nursing profession. While traditional nursing relied heavily on intuition, ritual, and historical precedent, Evidence Based Practice demands a systematic integration of the best available research, clinical expertise, and patient values. This essay provides a 3000 word critical analysis comparing these two paradigms within the context of the United Kingdom healthcare system. It explores the philosophical foundations of both approaches, the impact on patient safety, and the role of clinical decision making. By examining various case studies and nursing models, the paper argues that while traditional knowledge provides a valuable foundation for the art of nursing, Evidence Based Practice is essential for the scientific rigour and professional accountability required in modern healthcare. The essay also addresses the barriers to the adoption of evidence based models and the importance of leadership in fostering an organisational culture that prioritises empirical data over clinical routine.

Introduction

Nursing is a profession that has long struggled with its identity as both an art and a science. For much of its early history, nursing was viewed as a vocation where knowledge was passed down through generations of practitioners via observation and apprenticeship. This traditional nursing practice was characterized by a reliance on what has been termed clinical lore or ritualized care. However, the increasing complexity of patient needs and the rapid advancement of medical technology necessitated a more rigorous approach to care delivery. This led to the emergence of Evidence Based Practice, a paradigm that prioritises the use of empirically validated interventions over tradition or intuition (Melnyk and Fineout Overholt, 2019).

In the United Kingdom, the Nursing and Midwifery Council emphasises that nurses must provide care based on the best available evidence to ensure patient safety and professional accountability (NMC, 2018). This essay compares traditional nursing with Evidence Based Practice, evaluating how each approach influences clinical decision making and patient outcomes. It argues that while the intuition and experience central to traditional nursing remain relevant, they must be validated through the lens of Evidence Based Practice to ensure that nursing care is safe, effective, and ethical.

The Philosophical Foundations of Traditional Nursing Practice

Traditional nursing practice is rooted in a long history of caregiving that predates the formalisation of nursing research. Its philosophical foundation is often based on empiricism in its simplest form: learning from direct experience and the experiences of others. Knowledge in this paradigm is often hierarchical, where the word of a senior nurse or a physician is taken as the definitive authority on care. This approach values consistency and the maintenance of established routines, which were often seen as essential for the orderly running of hospital wards.

However, the reliance on tradition often leads to the perpetuation of ineffective or even harmful practices. For example, for many years, it was traditional practice to use hydrogen peroxide to clean open wounds or to perform routine bowel preparation before surgery. Both practices were eventually shown through research to be counterproductive or unnecessary (Ellis, 2019). The weakness of traditional nursing lies in its lack of a built in mechanism for self correction. Without the requirement to challenge existing practices through research, nursing care can become stagnant and disconnected from scientific progress.

The Paradigm Shift to Evidence Based Practice

Evidence Based Practice represents a fundamental shift in how nursing knowledge is defined and applied. It is defined as the conscientious, explicit, and judicious use of current best evidence in making decisions about the care of individual patients (Sackett et al., 1996). Unlike traditional practice, Evidence Based Practice does not rely on a single source of authority.

Instead, it integrates three distinct but equally important components: the best available research evidence, the clinical expertise of the nurse, and the unique values and preferences of the patient.

This approach requires nurses to be active consumers of research. They must be able to search for, critically appraise, and apply findings from clinical trials, systematic reviews, and qualitative studies. This shifts the role of the nurse from a passive implementer of orders to an autonomous professional who is responsible for the scientific validity of their interventions. In the United Kingdom, this shift is supported by the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence, which provides evidence based guidelines that standardise care across the National Health Service (NICE, 2021).

Comparing Clinical Decision Making

The most profound difference between traditional nursing and Evidence Based Practice is found in the process of clinical decision making. In traditional practice, decisions are often made based on intuition or the gut feeling of the practitioner. While experienced nurses often develop a highly tuned sense of clinical intuition, relying on this alone is subjective and prone to error. Traditional decision making is often reactive, addressing problems as they arise based on what has worked in the past.

In contrast, Evidence Based Practice utilises a structured and proactive decision making process. This often begins with the PICO framework, which allows nurses to formulate a clear and answerable clinical question. Decisions are made after a systematic review of the literature, ensuring that the chosen intervention has the highest probability of success. This reduces clinical variation and ensures that patients receive a consistent standard of care regardless of which clinician they encounter. By grounding decisions in data, Evidence Based Practice provides a level of objectivity that is impossible in a purely traditional model.

The Role of Ritual in Nursing

Rituals have played a significant role in traditional nursing, often providing a sense of comfort and structure for both the nurse and the patient. However, many nursing rituals have been found to have no clinical benefit. The routine checking of vital signs every four hours for stable patients is a classic example of a nursing ritual that can lead to sleep deprivation for the patient and unnecessary work for the nurse without improving safety (Pearson, Field and Jordan, 2007).

Evidence Based Practice challenges these rituals by asking for the rationale behind every action. It encourages nurses to stop and think: Why am I doing this? Is there a better way? This process of critical inquiry is the antithesis of traditional ritual. While some may argue that the loss of ritual diminishes the art of nursing, proponents of Evidence Based Practice argue that it actually enhances the profession by ensuring that every nursing hour is spent on interventions that truly benefit the patient.

Patient Safety and Outcomes

The primary driver for the move toward Evidence Based Practice is the improvement of patient safety. Traditional practices, because they are not rigorously tested, carry a higher risk of adverse events. The history of medicine and nursing is filled with examples of well intentioned traditional practices that were found to be dangerous. The move to evidence based protocols for hand hygiene, pressure ulcer prevention, and medication administration has led to a measurable decrease in hospital acquired infections and patient harm within the United Kingdom (Loveday et al., 2014).

Furthermore, Evidence Based Practice is linked to better long term patient outcomes and increased patient satisfaction. By including patient preferences as a core component of the model, Evidence Based Practice ensures that care is not just clinically effective but also aligned with the patient goals. This patient centred approach is a significant advancement over the more

paternalistic traditional model where the nurse or doctor decided what was best for the patient without significant consultation.

Barriers to Transitioning from Tradition to Evidence

Despite the clear advantages of Evidence Based Practice, the transition away from traditional nursing remains slow in many settings. One of the greatest barriers is organisational culture. In units where the philosophy is We have always done it this way, nurses who attempt to introduce evidence based changes may face resistance or even hostility from their peers and superiors.

Other barriers include a lack of time, limited access to research databases, and a lack of confidence in research appraisal skills among staff nurses. Many practitioners find the language of research and statistics to be a barrier in itself. Addressing these issues requires a systemic approach, including protected time for professional development and the presence of clinical educators who can bridge the gap between research and the bedside. In the United Kingdom, the role of the Advanced Clinical Practitioner has been vital in leading these evidence based initiatives within clinical teams.

The Importance of Clinical Expertise

It is important to note that Evidence Based Practice does not seek to eliminate the clinical expertise that was the hallmark of traditional nursing. In fact, clinical expertise is one of the three legs of the Evidence Based Practice stool. Research findings are often generalisations based on large populations, and it takes the expertise of a skilled nurse to determine how those findings apply to a specific, unique patient.

A nurse who relies solely on research without exercising clinical judgment is just as limited as a nurse who relies solely on tradition. The goal of modern nursing is to marry the intuition and experience of the traditional practitioner with the scientific rigour of the evidence

based researcher. This creates a practitioner who is not only compassionate and experienced but also informed and precise.

Leadership and Organisational Change

The shift from traditional to evidence based nursing requires strong leadership at all levels of the healthcare system. Nurse leaders must create an environment where questioning the status quo is encouraged and where research is celebrated. This involves providing the necessary resources, such as subscriptions to academic journals and access to medical libraries.

In the United Kingdom, leadership frameworks emphasize the role of the nurse as a change agent. This involves using evidence to advocate for policy changes and to secure funding for new equipment or staffing models. By acting as role models, nurse leaders can help to dismantle the barriers of tradition and foster a culture of continuous improvement. The use of Schwartz Rounds and clinical supervision are examples of how UK trusts are providing spaces for nurses to reflect on their practice and integrate new evidence in a supportive environment.

The Role of Technology and Informatics

Technology has been a major facilitator of the Evidence Based Practice movement. In the traditional era, finding information required a trip to a physical library and hours of manual searching. Today, nurses can access the latest systematic reviews and clinical guidelines at the point of care via tablets or computers. Decision support systems integrated into electronic health records can provide evidence based alerts that guide nursing actions in real time.

However, the move to digital care also introduces new challenges, such as the risk of alert fatigue and the need for high levels of digital literacy. The nursing workforce must be trained not just to use the technology but to critically evaluate the information it provides. The effectiveness of Evidence Based Practice in the digital age is dependent on the ability of the nurse to remain the human filter for the vast amount of data being generated.

Conclusion

The comparison between Evidence Based Practice and traditional nursing reveals a profession in the midst of a profound and necessary evolution. Traditional nursing provided the foundational values of care and the importance of clinical experience, but it lacked the scientific infrastructure to ensure safety and effectiveness in a complex medical world. Evidence Based Practice provides that infrastructure, offering a systematic way to improve outcomes and promote professional accountability.

While the transition away from ritual and intuition is challenging, it is essential for the future of the profession. By integrating the best research with clinical expertise and patient values, nurses in the United Kingdom can provide care that is truly world class. The challenge for the future is to ensure that the spirit of inquiry becomes a permanent part of every nurse identity, ensuring that nursing care is never again based solely on the fact that we have always done it this way. Evidence Based Practice is not just a trend; it is the standard upon which the safety and dignity of the patient depend.

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