Nurses’ and Patients’ Experiences of an Open vs. Enclosed Nursing Station in an Acute Care Psychiatric Setting: Are Structural Changes Important?

Mona Shattell\(^1\) PhD, RN, FAAN; Kelly Southard\(^1\) RN, BSN, MBA; Kyles Beres, RN, MS; Robin Bartlett\(^2\) PhD, RN; Christine A. Judge\(^3\) RN, BSN, BC; Claire Bell, BA; Patty Duke, RN, BC

Abstract

The purpose of this study was to examine the effect of nursing station design on therapeutic milieu in an adult acute care psychiatric unit. A qualitative descriptive design was used where phenomenological interviews were conducted with nurses and patients. Data were collected from a convenience sample of 13 patients and 16 nurses who described their experience on a unit with an open nurses’ station. Patients’ experienced increased access to nurses and a more comforting environment. Nurses’ communicated in a more personal fashion and met patient’s needs more quickly. Concerns related to patient confidentiality and frequent patient interruptions were also reported.

The study used a qualitative descriptive design. Phenomenological interviews were conducted to gather data. Participants in the study either were nurses who worked in the acute psychiatric hospital environment or were adult patients on the same unit. The inclusion criteria for the patients were an admittance on the unit when the nursing station was enclosed, and after it was opened; hospitalized for at least 2.5 days, competent, 18 years of age or older, and English speaking. The inclusion criteria for nurses were those who presently worked on the unit and were employed prior to September 2010, when the nursing station was enclosed.

The total sample included 13 patients and 16 nurses. Patient participants included three women and 10 men. In the staff sample, 15 were women and one was a man.

The open nursing station resulted in patients’ experiencing an increased access to nurses and the unit as a comforting environment over the previous institutional appearance.

Nurses’ acknowledged increased awareness of patients’ presence on the unit; communicated in a more personal fashion and met patients’ needs more efficiently, however also identified concerns about patient confidentiality and frequent interruptions.

Removing physical barriers from nursing stations has a positive impact on the nurse-patient relationship and improves patient perceptions of feeling cared for and respected. Attention should be paid to creating a workspace that protects patient confidentiality and decreases nurse interruptions when performing work tasks. Poor station design could result in increased nurse stress and dissatisfaction.

Meeting patients’ needs more quickly could improve patient satisfaction and prevent escalating situations, resulting in milieu stability.

Patient satisfaction is critical in terms of the current healthcare environment (e.g., related to payment), and may be critical in terms of psychiatric inpatient response to treatment. Open nursing stations may be an important element of patient satisfaction and of successful treatment.

Findings

Psychiatric inpatients in our sample nearly unanimously preferred the open nursing station vs the closed station.

Inpatients reported feeling safer, less isolated, more included in their treatment process, and freer (even in a locked psychiatric inpatient environment).

Almost all of the nurses preferred the open nursing station, indicating it improved relationships with patients and their ability to monitor and assess them. However, many of the nurses had concerns with station design, citing lack of confidentiality and loss of control of their work time/activities.

Background

The National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI, 2007) estimates that 21% of all hospital beds at any given time are occupied by persons with a mental illness.

While many studies suggest patient dissatisfaction, poor unit design, and lack of nurse-patient interactions, no research could be found that examined the lived experiences of patients or nurses on a unit with an open nurses’ station.

Conclusions

Implications

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