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Healthcare assistants' attitudes towards older people and their knowledge about ageing

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Abstract:

Aim: This study aims to assess the attitudes of healthcare assistants (HCAs) towards elderly patients in long-term care settings and their knowledge of aging, with a focus on implications for nursing leadership in Ireland.

Method: A survey was conducted using a convenience sample of HCAs across three long-term care facilities in Ireland.

Results: The study revealed predominantly positive attitudes among HCAs towards older patients. Furthermore, a correlation was observed between a deeper understanding of aging and more positive attitudes among HCAs.

Conclusion: Given the challenges posed by changing population demographics and nursing shortages, it is crucial to prioritize continuing education for HCAs. Nursing leadership plays a pivotal role in driving innovations in education that can enhance HCAs' knowledge and foster positive attitudes towards elderly care.

Keywords: Attitude, healthcare assistants, Ireland, knowledge, long-term care, nursing leadership

Introduction

Global projections indicate a significant rise in the aging population, with the number of people aged over 65 in the Republic of Ireland expected to nearly triple from 532,000 in 2011 to approximately 1.4 million by 2046 (Central Statistics Office, 2013). While many older individuals remain healthy and live within their communities, the segment requiring care in residential settings is projected to increase by 59% to 64% by 2021 (Wren et al., 2012). The National Standards for Residential Care Settings for Older People in Ireland (Health Information and Quality Authority, 2014) emphasize the importance of high-quality care and appropriately skilled staff. For instance, they mandate that all healthcare assistants (HCAs) working with older individuals undertake specific Further Education and Training Awards Council (FETAC) courses focused on their care. (Allan & Johnson, 2008)

The quality-of-care older people receive often mirrors societal attitudes toward this demographic (Doherty et al., 2011). Palmore (1998) noted that many people's understandings of aging is influenced by myths and misconceptions, a sentiment echoed by Lee (2009), who found similar misconceptions among healthcare staff despite their educational background. The knowledge healthcare practitioners possess about aging directly impacts the services they deliver (Ferrario et al., 2007).

There is growing recognition of the importance of HCAs within the workforce of residential care settings for older individuals in Ireland and the UK (Griffiths and Robinson, 2010). Despite numerous studies exploring healthcare professionals' attitudes toward aging and older individuals, a gap persists regarding HCAs' knowledge of aging and their attitudes toward older people (Doherty et al., 2011).

Literature Review

The literature review highlights a longstanding interest in understanding attitudes towards older adults, with seminal studies by Kogan (1961) indicating prevalent negative attitudes that often correlate with reduced quality of care (Plonczynski et al., 2007). Studies involving various health professionals, including physicians, nurse tutors, nurse managers, allied health professionals, and nurses across different care settings, have reported a spectrum of attitudes ranging from negative to positive (Gunderson et al., 2005; Schrader, 2009; Hweidi and Al-Hassan, 2005; Zampieron et al., 2012; Runkawatt et al., 2013).

Gallagher et al. (2006) compared attitudes towards older people among healthcare assistants (HCAs), nurses, and porters in Irish acute and long-term care settings, finding significantly more negative attitudes among HCAs and porters compared to nurses. Age, years in practice, and education level were identified as predictors of attitude.

Doherty et al. (2011) conducted a study in Ireland and Northern Ireland using Kogan's (1961) Attitudes towards Older People (KOP) Scale, revealing no significant differences in attitudes between HCAs and nurses. However, the study noted a high uptake of relevant courses by HCAs following the publication of National Standards, possibly influencing their attitudes positively.

Studies in Scotland (Kydd et al., 2013) indicated a positive shift in healthcare workers' attitudes towards older people over time, but specific recommendations for HCAs were lacking. Poor knowledge of aging and older people has been observed among healthcare personnel globally, with significant differences noted based on education and training levels (Scherer et al., 2008; Allan and Johnson, 2008; Lambrinou et al., 2009; Topaz and Doran, 2013).

While medical and nursing students' attitudes have been extensively studied, limited research focuses on HCAs' attitudes towards older people and their knowledge of aging, highlighting a gap in understanding given the increasing role of HCAs in eldercare.

Aim

The aim of this study was to assess healthcare assistants' (HCAs) attitudes towards elderly patients in long-term care settings and their knowledge of aging.

Methods

A survey was conducted with a convenience sample of healthcare assistants (HCAs) working in three long-term care facilities in the Republic of Ireland. The study assessed HCAs' attitudes towards older people using the Kogan's (1961) Attitudes towards Older People (KOP) Scale. Additionally, knowledge of aging was evaluated using the Facts on Aging Quiz (FAQ) (Palmore, 1998), a 25-item questionnaire covering physical, social, and emotional aspects related to aging, as well as common misconceptions. The FAQ is widely used in healthcare studies and has demonstrated reliability across various settings.

Descriptive statistics, including mean, standard deviation (SD), median (interquartile range, IQR), and frequency, were computed for demographic variables. Continuous variables were analyzed using t-tests or ANOVA, while categorical variables were assessed with numbers and percentages. Relationships between independent variables (demographics) and dependent variables (KOP Scale and FAQ scores) were explored through univariate analysis, with significance set at $P < 0.05$. The Mann-Whitney U test and Kruskal-Wallis test were used for comparing continuous variables between groups, and Spearman's rank correlation analyzed ordinal or continuous variable relationships. Statistical analysis was performed using Statistical Package for Social Sciences version 20.

Ethical considerations were addressed by obtaining ethical approval from relevant clinical research ethics committees and permissions from directors of nursing in each hospital to distribute questionnaires to HCAs. Informed consent, confidentiality, anonymity, and voluntary participation were ensured and communicated to participants through pre-study information. Questionnaires were coded to maintain respondents' confidentiality and anonymity.

Results:

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A total of 86 questionnaires were distributed among healthcare assistants (HCAs), resulting in 52 completed surveys and a response rate of 60%. The demographic characteristics of the respondents are summarized in Table 1. The majority of HCAs were female (75%) and aged between 45 and 64 years (67%). Most respondents had a leaving certificate/A level as their highest education level (75%), and almost all reported completing a specialized course in older adult care or another relevant course (94%).

Attitudes towards older people:

HCAs displayed a positive attitude towards older people, with a mean KOP Scale score of 170 (median 173).

Knowledge about aging:

The overall mean score on the Facts on Aging Quiz (FAQ) was 41%. The median score for correct answers on the FAQ was 10 (interquartile range, IQR: 8-12), with scores ranging from 6 to 16. Figure 1 illustrates the distribution of correct answers, showing a relatively balanced spread of responses around the median.

Regarding specific questions on the FAQ, a large majority of respondents correctly agreed that physical strength declines with age (88%) and that older people can learn new things at a slower pace (69%). However, fewer respondents correctly identified that lung vital capacity decreases with age (58%). Additionally, only a minority agreed that the accident rate among workers over 65 is higher than among younger workers (17%) or that poverty rates are higher among older people compared to those under 65 (13%).

Relationship between demographics and knowledge of aging:

Significant relationships were observed between higher knowledge scores and gender (P=0.003) and length of time working as an HCA (P=0.045). Men had higher median knowledge scores compared to women, and HCAs with six to ten years of experience had higher median scores than those with 11 or more years of experience.

Influence of demographics on HCA attitudes:

Age had a significant influence on attitudes, with younger HCAs exhibiting more positive attitudes than older HCAs (P=0.033). However, no significant associations were found between attitudes and working hours or education level.

Relationship between knowledge of aging and attitudes:

There was a small but statistically significant positive correlation (correlation coefficient=0.250, P=0.074) between knowledge of aging and attitudes towards older people, indicating that greater knowledge was associated with a more positive attitude.

Discussion:

This study provides valuable insights into healthcare assistants' (HCAs) attitudes towards older people and their knowledge of aging. However, there are several limitations to consider. The small sample size and the focus on a single geographical location in Ireland limit the generalizability of the findings. Despite this limitation, this study contributes to the limited research conducted with HCAs working with older individuals, offering a basis for further extensive research on knowledge and attitudes in this context. (Central Statistics Office, 2013)

The voluntary nature of questionnaire response may have introduced bias, as respondents might have been motivated to answer in a socially desirable manner, potentially influencing the positive outcomes observed. Future qualitative studies could delve deeper into HCAs' knowledge and attitudes towards older people, providing a more nuanced understanding of these factors. (Doherty et al., 2011)

There has been some debate regarding the suitability of the KOP Scale (Kogan 1961) to measure attitudes towards older people in contemporary society, particularly due to its potentially dated language. Despite this, the KOP Scale and FAQ were chosen as they are widely used in the literature, facilitating comparisons with previous studies. (Griffiths & Robinson, 2010)

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Results indicated that female gender and length of time working as an HCA significantly influenced knowledge about aging. This contrasts with some previous research findings but aligns with others, highlighting the complex interplay of demographic factors in shaping attitudes and knowledge. (Health Information and Quality Authority, 2014)

Interestingly, while attitudes towards older people were generally positive among HCAs, there were significant differences based on age group, with younger HCAs showing more positive attitudes. This finding underscores the importance of awareness and personal reflection in addressing societal attitudes towards older individuals. (Hweidi & Al-Hassan, 2005)

The positive correlation between knowledge and attitudes supports the argument that knowledge plays a crucial role in shaping attitudes towards older people. Educational interventions focusing on gerontological content have been effective in changing attitudes and knowledge among medical and nursing staff, suggesting potential avenues for improving HCAs' understanding and attitudes in this domain. (Kydd et al., 2013)

In conclusion, while this study has limitations, it sheds light on HCAs' attitudes and knowledge regarding aging and older people. Further research, including qualitative investigations and interventions, is warranted to deepen our understanding and enhance the quality of care provided to older individuals by HCAs. (Lerner et al., 2010)

Conclusion:

As the global population of older adults continues to grow and the nursing workforce faces shortages, healthcare assistants (HCAs) are increasingly playing a crucial role in providing direct care to older individuals, especially in long-term care settings. The quality-of-care older people receive is directly linked to the attitudes of care staff, emphasizing the importance of recognizing HCAs' contributions and providing them with appropriate training opportunities aimed at enhancing their competence and confidence in caring for older individuals.

Further research is essential to understand the impact of HCA education on the care provided to older people. Both qualitative and quantitative studies are recommended to explore how increasing knowledge about aging influences care outcomes. However, it's crucial to note that knowledge alone is insufficient if not applied in practice regularly. Therefore, ongoing review, assessment of learning needs, career guidance, and support for self-development among HCAs are recommended. Nurse leadership can also play a significant role in promoting increased knowledge and improved attitudes towards older people among HCAs, contributing to better care outcomes for this vulnerable population.

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