**Research Article**

**Student Nurses’ perspective of Clinical Rotation during COVID 19 Pandemic: A New Stressor**

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**Abstract**

Nursing curriculum has been known to be one of the most rigorous undergraduate curriculums. The COVID- 19 pandemic may have led to a new source of stress for nursing students. The purpose of this study is to determine if the COVID-19 pandemic has added any extra stress to the nursing student and how those stressors may have impacted the student’s academic performance. Literature supports the unique stressors that nursing students need to manage to be successful in the program. Two stressors in particular unique to nursing school are the simulation experiences and the caring for patients. Literature supports the need for nursing instructors to provide support to these students to help with the successful completion of the program. Even during the Covid pandemic, clinical and simulation experiences are offered in the “live” classroom setting. The safety of the virtual environment is not offered to these students. Students now have to enter the clinical and simulation environment with new protocols such as wearing continual PPE, the fear of contracting COVID-19, and social distancing when possible. Since junior and senior nursing students are participating in simulation and clinical experiences, these 95 students were given a paper questionnaire to determine the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on their academic performance. The questionnaire included yes/no questions and a comments sections. Using a grounded theory approach, the results were analyzed. The analysis highlighted that that 95% of nursing students did feel that the Covid pandemic effected their clinical experience and, furthermore, 46% of students reported that they had hesitation about returning to the “live” in-person experiences. The following themes could be made: anxiety, fear of Covid transmission and exposure, isolation from family/friends, awareness of PPE usage, and poor learning experiences. These themes will challenge the nursing instructor to ensure that they identify vulnerable students and offer support and to ensure that learning experiences are optimized through simulation. Lastly, further research is needed to determine how the new hybrid approach to nursing school effects NCLEX scores and clinical orientation of the new graduate nurse

**Keywords:** Clinical experiences; Covid 19; Nursing student; Perceived effects; Stressors

**Introduction**

The undergraduate nursing curriculum has many unique stressors due to the rigor of the leaning objectives with the addition of the skills acquisitions the student nurse needs to successfully complete. To obtain the skills acquisitions, student nurses need to attend both “Live” clinical experiences and simulated “Live” experiences. Nursing instructors need to provide clinical and simulation experiences that will meet program objectives such as skill development and clinical judgement. Due to the Covid pandemic, nursing clinical instructors have been challenged to meet those objectives due to barriers in the clinical experiences and simulated experiences. Hospitals have limited floor availabilities, time allotted in hospitals, less staff, and a variety clinical experiences such as certain procedures due to safety concerns and maintaining Covid protocols. In addition, social distancing had made the simulated experiences challenging for nursing instructor to maintain the distance while meeting simulation objectives. Clinical and simulated courses had to change and adapt to ensure safety of the students, faculty, nursing staff, and patients.

Furthermore, students may have the added fear of the potential exposure to Covid -19. In a systematic review, Lasheras, et al. [1] reported that medical students had the same level of anxiety during their clinical studies, however, some those stressors were specifically now related to the Covid pandemic. These changes and new concerns can lead to new stressors on nursing students, as they have to adapt to new learning styles. One major change was longer clinical days (12 hour days as compared to 6 hour days), which allowed for the required number of hours, yet less physical days in the hospital setting. Another was the increase of online classroom learning. The purpose of this study is to determine if the COVID-19 pandemic has added any extra stress to the already known, documented stressors for the nursing student and how those stressors may have impacted the student’s academic performance.

**Review of Literature**

In 2020, an integrated review by Kachaturoff et al. published an article describing the positive effects of peer mentoring on nursing students. The need for peer mentoring was established due to the higher levels of stress and anxiety that nursing students experienced when compared to other programs [2]. Nursing students, therefore, experience both physical and psychological distress [2]. Peer mentoring has been proven as an effective tool to help minimize the anxiety of nursing students. In 2018, a poster presentation was accepted at the UNA Research Day by Dr. Duke that outlined perceived stressors in nursing school. Though 78% of the participants indicated testing as the top stressor, 12% of students also identified simulation as another stressor [3]. Students further identify sleep, watching TV, socialization, and exercise as methods to relieve stress. Peer mentorship programs have been developed among nursing students to help lessen perceived stressors and build community [4].

In 2017, Labragur et al. published a literature review discussing nursing student’s stress levels and coping strategies. Nursing students experience moderate to high levels of stress [5]. Caring for patents was identified as a stressor for nursing students as well as workload and interaction with faculty [5]. Nursing students tend to use problem-solving strategies to attempt to alleviate stress. More recently, Masha’al, et al. [6] looked at distance learning-related stress among undergraduate nursing students during the COVID-19 pandemic. Feelings of isolation and the lack of physical and social contact among educators and peers prevailed as disadvantages [6]. Interestingly, depending on the sociodemographic, students found advantages including becoming more active learners in the learning progress, eliminating travel time, and self-pacing course work [6].

**Methodology**

In October 2020, 47 junior level nursing students and 38 senior level nursing students at a state school in Pennsylvania were given a survey about their perspective of their clinical and simulation course since returning to “Live” clinical and simulation since the March 2020 lockdown due to the Covid pandemic. The survey was a paper and pencil, anonymous form. The survey included five yes/no questions and five open ended clarification questions as follow up to the yes/no questions. The students were given a 30-minute time frame after clinical or simulation class to answer the survey. The faculty was not be present during the survey. A student who volunteered placed the unidentified results in an envelope and sealed it once completed. That student also signed the envelope stating that the questionnaire was answered anonymously without faculty influence.

**Data Analysis**

Of the 74 surveys given, 69 surveys were returned. The yes/no questions were tallied by a Principal Investigator and inputted into an Excel worksheet. The open-ended questions were analyzed by the researchers using a grounded theory approach. Through this approach, the researchers were able to use theoretical sampling. Themes were created and coded and inputted into an Excel spreadsheet.

**Study Findings**

Sixty-eight percent of the nursing students reported that the Covid pandemic had changed their view of their clinical experience. However, 43% of the students reported hesitation about returning to their clinical course. When asked if the students received pressure or concerns from family/friends about returning to clinical, 50% of the students reported that they had. Forty-five percent of students reported that they thought that the Covid pandemic effected their clinical performance; however, only 30% felt that they would contact Covid during “Live” classes. Lastly, 96% of students felt that their instructors prepared them to maintain Covid safety standards during their class. When asked open-ended clarification questions to these yes/no questions, the following six themes were determined: anxiety, contacting COVID, transmitting COVID, isolation, changes in clinical learning, and infection prevention.

**Anxiety**

Many students reported that they had anxiety, fears, and nervousness surrounding their clinical experience. Students reported these fears pertaining to Covid exposure and transmission of Covid. Students also had concerns they were not receiving adulate experiences due to the limitations associated with Covid and hospital protocol. Common responses included “I have increased anxiety in the hospital and honestly did not feel safe” and “I was nervous about not getting enough clinical hours.” Other responses included feelings of anxiety over not feeling they were adequately prepared with missing experiences in the previous semester due to remote learning.

**Exposure and Transmission of Covid**

Another common theme was students concerns for either contracting Covid or transmitting Covid to their friends or family. Many students reported having high-risk family members and so, therefore, had concerns with transmission to them: “Just contacting Covid and brining it home to my family. I would feel awful spreading it.” Some students responded that they did not feel like they were at risk among their friends so they were attending social events and parties; but felt a sense of fear coming into clinical seeing they were around sick people and could spread it to them. One student responded that as a student who is immunocompromised, he/she was extremely scared of contracting Covid and would not feel safe until vaccinated.

**Isolation**

A few students reported that their family or friends would prefer they did not visit until clinical was over. Students reported spending less time at home or remaining on campus throughout the semester. Students also reported that their family and/or friends asked if they cared for anyone during clinical who was Covid positive as a measure for if they would be willing to see them.

**Clinical Learning**

This theme had the greatest amount of responses. Most students had significant concerns about their learning during the clinical experience. Many students felt that the limitations due to Covid had a huge impact on their ability to learn. The students felt that their leaning was limited due to not being able to participate in certain procedures or procedural areas. In the past, students were able to rotate to the Intensive Care Unit, Operating Room, and Cath Lab however, the hospitals did not allow students to have those experiences throughout the Covid Pandemic. Students were also concerned with the longer days but shortened clinical time had a negative impact on their learning. “The limited time at clinical prevented me from practicing my hands on skills.” Specifically, senior level nursing students felt that their inability to participate in the critical care rotation effected their clinical experience negatively. “Instead of having my critical care experience, I feel like I had med-surg twice.” Seniors also mentioned that not having the traditional senior practicum with a nurse was a major limitation and they believe they were not going to be as prepared as they should be to graduate.

**Infection Prevention**

Many students reported that they were much more aware of infection prevention standards. Students felt that they were much more stringent about hand hygiene wearing the appropriate PPE and social distancing than before. They also reported being much more aware of other clinical staffs’ practice in regards to PPE. Furthermore, they identified that when they did not observe proper practice, they felt nervous and unsafe. “A lot of nurses and doctors take their masks off in the hallway which gives me trust issues.” A few students also mentioned that they would have felt safer if supplied with an N95 mask versus the single surgical mask they were expected to wear for their whole shift.

**Implications for Practice**

The results of this study identify that there a new stressor placed upon nursing students due to the Covid pandemic. Nursing instructors need to support their students and implement new, innovate ways to help alleviate those stressors. Nursing Instructors can review and demonstrate proper PPE practice and hospital specific guidelines to clarify student’s expectations. During midterm evaluations nursing instructors can poll their students to identify missing skills and offer skill lab opportunities for students to practice those skills, Lastly, post conference can be used as a forum to discuss stressor and offer problem solving techniques to alleviate the stressors and in addition offer socialization to students.

Acknowledging that feelings of isolation and the lack of physical and social contact among educators and peers exists, creating specific check in times with small groups may be beneficial to ensure students are heard [6]. A check off list for skills completed may help students to focus on all of the skills they did complete instead of focusing on things they feel like they have missed out on. Things not completed on the check off list could be return demonstrated in the skills lab. A peer mentorship program among nursing students may also be beneficial to this unique student population [4].

**Future Research**

Students have identified that the limited clinical days has impacted their skills acquisition negatively. As these student nurses graduate, research to determine if the shortened clinical time effects the orientation process of new nurses into their clinical area may to a way to help guide undergraduate nursing clinical and simulation to determine where the deficits are and how to bridge the gap. With the increase of remote and more self-directed classroom learning, it will be interesting to look at NCLEX scores and pass rates to see if this has helped or hindered students in preparing for the state boards.

Depending on the student population and demographic, a hybrid approach with a mix of in person and online components could potentially be helpful in preparing the undergraduate student nurse. Further research is needed to assess how a hybrid approach might look. More research is also needed to determine how peer mentoring could help lessen perceived stress and potentially help address the feelings of isolation [4].

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