

The Nurse of the 21st century Project

The scope of the competency gap in the area of soft skills in preparing nurses for the profession

The work related to the identification of competency gaps in the field of soft skills in the nursing profession was divided in three main stages:

1. An initial quantitative analysis of desirable competencies requiring development actions - opinions of nurses collected as part of the questionnaire research carried out in the project. The evaluation of desirable competencies and competency gaps concerned, among others, soft skills.
2. Work in national teams – the assessment of the situation on the basis of desk research, including scientific articles, specialist literature, the results of research and own observations of head nurses and people involved in the development and training of nursing staff, as well as individual interviews carried out with hospital employees (nurses).
3. The summary as part of the activity of working teams during the partner meeting in Berlin in October 2019. The work was carried out in three teams according to the workshop scenario prepared by the German Partner. The result was the identification of soft skills which are common, universal and necessary in the nursing profession.

The aim of the first stage was to identify competencies which are not sufficiently shaped in the process of formal education when preparing for the nursing profession. The identification of these competencies indicates a need to formulate recommendations in the area of vocational education preparing mid-level medical staff for their profession. According to the results of the questionnaire surveys, the main problem in this area is the lack of an adequate level of psychological resilience and assertiveness, as well as the lack of the ability to deal with stress in an effective manner. Other missing competencies of nursing graduates indicated by the respondents include communication skills, the ability to work in a team and the ability to maintain the work-life balance. These competencies should be shaped in the course of formal education, and then regularly improved as part of lifelong learning throughout one's working life.

Characteristics important in the nursing profession (soft skills), which should be shaped in the course of general education, are also those commonly expected of professional nurses: responsibility, kindness and care. These traits are also crucial in patient care. However, a lack of development of these characteristics at an early stage of general education makes it often impossible to effectively build the quality of professional education of nurses. It leads to the lack of appropriate emotional maturity and a suitably shaped personality, which translates into problems with a balanced level of sensitivity and empathy in contact with other people. Thus,

these competencies should be verified at the stage of employment or even earlier - during the period of making decisions concerning vocational training. One should take care of the proper development of nurses mainly through individual activities (mentoring, tutoring) as well as by implementing solutions developed by more experienced co-workers.

The results of the second stage pointed to several important competency areas requiring development activities. The first area is connected with the essence of nursing which is based on holistic and individualised care, that is, a holistic approach adapted to patients' expectations. For this approach to work successfully, the work of a nurse, in addition to professional (substantive) skills and appropriate emotional preparation, must be based on the skills of organising own and team's work. The key method is the method of nursing process. Using this method in accordance with the principle "my patient - my nurse" guarantees personalisation of tasks and full responsibility for a given group of patients. Nursing care ceases to be anonymous and the patient gains subjectivity. The ability to use this method is primarily the ability to analyse different aspects, draw conclusions at the stage of planning patient care, as well as to evaluate the effects of care (analytical skills, logical thinking and a comprehensive analysis). In addition to the proper organisation of work, it is also necessary to improve the soft skills important when dealing with patients and other co-workers. In direct conversations with nurses, there is a clear emphasis on the atmosphere at work and the role of a leader. When holding a managerial position, it is important to be able to maintain the right balance between being a master of the profession/authority in a given field of nursing and the head of a nursing team (planning, organising, motivating, leading and supervising).

Other soft skills commonly expected of a good nurse, in addition to those mentioned above, include: patience, the ability to show respect, communication skills (including assertive communication - I respect others and I expect respect from them, too), the ability to listen actively - paraphrasing, the ability to use a phatic function - the function of expression focused on establishing and maintaining contact between interlocutors, social skills, willingness to help, flexibility - the ability to adapt to patients' expectations, a friendly attitude to patients. For the management staff, the desirable competencies include: leadership skills, appreciation of patients and employees, and the ability to provide constructive criticism which allows both parties (the criticising and the criticised one) to find a proper solution to a problem. The appropriate level of psychophysical features such as reflexes, good memory, self-control, honesty and assertiveness is also important.

During the workshops conducted as part of the project meeting in Berlin, it was noted that the work of nurses is based on a holistic care model. However, working conditions prevent its effective implementation – nurses who are burdened with too many duties and who need to take care of numerous patients are not always able to do it the way they would like to. Nurses do see patients' needs but are unable to meet them. The participants of the meeting discussed the importance of soft skills in professional work, with particular emphasis on empathy. They noted that this is one of the most desirable characteristics in the nursing profession. However, being empathic to patients, their families, doctors, colleagues and other people working in the hospital may become one of the reasons for occupational burnout. According to the meeting participants, the most important and desirable ability is the one which enables nursing staff to set boundaries

and build bridges. This skill has been named “a competency of oneself”, that is, the ability to take care of oneself. Great importance was assigned to the ability to create relationships with both patients and other co-workers, whereas key meaning – to communication skills, teamwork skills, flexibility, analytical skills, the ability to reflect, the ability to discover existing dependencies and solve problems, and to look at different things from a broader perspective. The meeting participants also remarked that it is very important to be able to transfer possessed soft skills to different areas of professional work and to use them in a flexible way depending on the situation.

It is worth noting that soft skills have many levels of advancement and therefore can and should be constantly developed throughout the entire professional life of nurses. However, the problem is the measurability of their level. Therefore, as one of the good solutions, the meeting participants suggested experience-based activities which allow nurses to become aware of their own skills (levels and resources) in relation to the requirements of everyday situations in the nursing profession. Shaping the right attitudes towards patients and their families (empathy, sympathy, patience, kindness, smile, body language, etc.) can be done through exercises/workshops in which nurses play the role of a sick person, e.g. a patient lying in bed (spending 1 day in bed with full dependence on other people around) or a patient with diabetes (e.g. taking blood samples and testing the sugar level for 3 days). Another proposal concerned a joint training course which would be attended by all professional groups (doctors, nurses, laboratory diagnosticians, physiotherapists, etc.) and which would be aimed at shaping the correct relations between co-workers - improving communication skills of the entire therapeutic team, which should then translate into an appropriate atmosphere in the workplace. Among other important competencies with clear gaps observed in all partner countries, one identified the following: the ability to organise own and team’s work, the ability to use foreign languages and the ability to use search engines for scientific research. Lifelong learning should also focus on the ability to maintain the right balance between work and personal life and the ability to rest effectively. It is very important to constantly develop assertive communication skills and competencies which help to cope with stressful situations (I respect others and I expect respect from them, too). In the case of selected employees, a lot of importance was assigned to training courses in the field of customer-orientation (that is, patient orientation, their needs and expectations).

Summary

The main gaps identified in the field of soft skills in the preparation of nurses for their profession concern four areas which require continuous development activities:

- psychosocial skills, including psychological resilience, assertiveness, the ability to deal with pressure and stress in an effective manner, as well as empathy,
- skills necessary for effective functioning in teams and maintaining contact with patients and their families: communication skills (including assertive communication, creating relationships with patients and co-workers), effective group work (including cooperation within various professional groups), ability to organise own and team’s work in the case of management representatives (including the ability to maintain the

balance between being a master of the profession/authority in a given field of nursing and the head of a nursing team),

- the ability to reconcile personal life with work, the ability to maintain the right balance between work and personal life, and the ability to rest effectively,
- analytical and logical thinking skills, including the ability to reflect, the ability to discover existing dependencies and solve problems, draw conclusions and look at different things from a broader perspective, in a comprehensive and holistic way.

Development activities should be focused not only on improving competencies but also on the ability to use soft skills in different professional areas, and to use them in a flexible manner depending on the situation.

It is also important to shape the right attitudes towards patients and their relatives, where one of the effective forms of raising awareness and evaluating one's own competency resources may be workshops based on experience (e.g. by playing the role of a patient).

The work carried out within the project also made it possible to formulate recommendations for general education institutions which should shape in students characteristics such as responsibility, friendliness and care. Later these traits translate into emotional maturity, as well as a balanced level of sensitivity and empathy in contact with other people.

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