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**A Study Exploring
Nurse Educators' Perceptions and Experiences of
Practice Related to Sexuality**

**Development of a Model
of Practice Related to Sexuality in
Nursing Education**

**A thesis presented in partial fulfilment
of the requirements for the degree of a**

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Abstract

Nursing literature identifies that sexuality is an integral part of holistic client care. However, research continues to indicate that nurses generally, *do not* address issues of sexuality with clients. While there is no absolute reason attributed to this deficit in client care, issues within undergraduate nursing education and the nurse educators have been implicated. While most of the literature is written by nurse educators, it appears to be their own views and/or anecdotal views of other nurse educators from reviews of the literature. I was unable to find research that is specifically focused on the perceptions and experiences of nurse educators in regard to practice related to sexuality in nursing education. Coupled with this, the literature is from overseas and is not necessarily the perceptions or experiences of lecturers within the New Zealand nursing curricula, and the literature is now somewhat dated. Before assumptions about sexuality-related practice in New Zealand undergraduate nursing education and nurse educators can be made, the current situation within the New Zealand nursing curricula needs to be explored. To my knowledge, a study of this nature has not been undertaken.

A descriptive qualitative research study was undertaken where six nurse educators from an undergraduate nursing programme in New Zealand were interviewed. From the analysis of the collected data, nursing lecturer's experiences and perceptions of practice related to sexuality were described. The analysis clearly suggests that further research and improvement is required in undergraduate nursing education, particularly sexuality assessment of the client in order to provide holistic care. A model for practice related to sexuality in nursing education has been developed and described.

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I would like to express my gratitude to family, friends and colleagues who have listened and provided support during the lows of this venture. My family eventually accepted that I am not 'superwoman' and that I cannot do everything. I have promised everyone that on completion of this thesis, I will get my life back and be a new person.

To the late Dr Shane Town – this thesis is dedicated to you and I hope I have done you justice. You will always be remembered for your part in this thesis. Without you, this thesis would not have been.

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Introduction To The Study

The major focus of this research is practice related to sexuality in undergraduate nursing education. Sexuality-related nursing practice can be described as nursing practice that relates to any aspect of a client's sexuality for example: biological sex, gender identity, gender orientation, self-concept, self-identity or sexual behaviour which may or may not be altered through illness, disease, disability and medical interventions or treatments.

After enrolling in the Master of Education Programme at Wellington Polytechnic, the first paper I chose to pursue was Special Topic: Sexuality in Adult Education Practice. At that time, I had been a practising nurse for 26 years, the latter years with an educational component, and during those years of practice and study, sexuality had not been a focus. Sexuality is so much a part of our everyday lives and also within nursing practice, and yet I had not had any formal education in this area. I looked forward to the challenge of learning something completely different from the topics I had covered in my undergraduate studies.

Meeting Dr Shane Town was an unexpected bonus. Shane coordinated the sexuality in adult education paper. Shane was a quiet, gentle, but strong and assertive man. He was inspirational. While studying the sexuality paper, the more I learned, the more I realised I did not know. I undertook a mini literature review on sexuality issues in nursing practice and memories of past nursing experiences flooded back.

I distinctly remember the first time I had to wash the genitals of a young male client, and how both he and I were acutely embarrassed. Embarrassment is infectious, difficult to conceal, typically unpleasant, often rescued by tact and wit and is out of proportion to the event (Meerabeau, 1999). How was I to react if a male client had an

erection while I was providing care for him? How was I to respond if a client asked me when they could resume sexual activity after discharge from hospital? What should I say when a client wants to discuss concerns related to their sexuality following body-image altering surgery? In the early stages of my career, I felt both embarrassed and inadequate. I was never prepared for sexuality-related nursing practice. I wonder how many clients have I said the wrong thing to, or have been left with unanswered questions 'after being in my care.' I shared my learning and concerns with colleagues who both 'listened' to me and shared issues and concerns that they could recall. From these informal discussions, it appeared that nurses are not well enough prepared for dealing with sexuality issues in nursing practice and many clients are receiving inadequate care in regard to issues of sexuality. At that point in my studies, I was busy learning about sexuality-related nursing practice from the literature and anecdotal evidence and had not seriously considered research in this area.

In early 2001, I heard of the death of Shane. I was both saddened and shocked at the loss of such a great person. I will always be grateful to Wellington Polytechnic and Shane for making the sexuality paper available to me. Shane's death and a change in employment to become a nurse educator in a Bachelor of Nursing Programme was the impetus that prompted my interest in researching practice related to sexuality in nursing education. It has been through my Master of Education studies that a course on sexuality was available to me, which I have applied to my nursing practice. This course enabled me to:

- critically examine the literature on sexuality issues in nursing practice
- increase my knowledge base about sexuality and the effect disease/illness and medical treatments have on clients
- critically reflect on my earlier clinical practice and current practice in education, including biases and attitudes

- make positive changes to the quantity and quality of teaching sexuality issues in nursing practice within the courses that I teach
- share my learning with friends and colleagues
- undertake research within the New Zealand setting

As a nurse educator, it is of personal interest and academic value to research issues that may affect undergraduate nursing education and therefore the knowledge and attitudes of nursing students, and ultimately, the quality of client care. I am not advocating that I am an expert on sexuality or that nurse educators are required to undertake sexuality education in the same way that I have. I do suggest though, that educators be adequately prepared for teaching practice related to sexuality.

Aims of this Study

The fundamental aim of any research in nursing practice or nursing education, is to improve client care and this research is concerned with nursing practice related to sexuality within nursing education.

The aim of this study was:

To explore nurse educators' perceptions and experiences of practice related to sexuality in nursing education, within one Bachelor of Nursing Programme in New Zealand, with a view to answering the following questions:

1. Do nurse educators have adequate knowledge and attitudes (preparation) for teaching nursing practice related to sexuality to nursing students?
2. Is there a lack of nursing practice related to sexuality within undergraduate nursing education?
3. Do nurse educators have a degree of discomfort or embarrassment while teaching nursing practice related to sexuality to nursing students?

Overview of the Chapters

Chapter One: Nursing Practice Related to Sexuality in Clinical Practice - A Review of the Literature

Chapter One provides a review of the literature of nursing practice related to sexuality in clinical practice, particularly the hospital setting. Most of the literature is from Britain or the United States of America. It is clearly evidenced that nurses are not meeting the needs of clients in regard to issues of sexuality. Chapter One lays the foundation for Chapter Two, which underpins the essence of this study.

Chapter Two: Nursing Practice Related to Sexuality in Undergraduate Nursing Education - A Review of the Literature

This second chapter details the results of a review of the literature of nursing practice related to sexuality within undergraduate nursing education, and this particularly pertains to this study. Most of the authors of this literature are nurse educators, and both nurse educators and nursing education are implicated in the deficit of client care in regard to issues of sexuality. Most of the evidence is from Britain or the United States of America.

Chapter Three: Research Design and Methodology

The methodological foundations of this study are presented. The methodology chapter differentiates between qualitative approaches commonly used in nursing research, and explains the rationale for the decision to conduct a non-experimental, descriptive or exploratory research study using a qualitative approach. The application of the methodology in this study is described including acknowledgement of the limitations and strengths of this research.

Chapter Four: Nurse Educators' Perceptions and Experiences of Practice Related to Sexuality in the Clinical Setting - Findings and Analysis

Findings from the study are presented in two chapters and Chapter Four is the first of two data chapters. It presents a description of the nurse educators' perceptions and experiences of client sexuality in clinical practice.

Chapter Five: Nurse Educators' Perceptions and Experiences of Practice Related to Sexuality in Undergraduate Nursing Education – Findings and Analysis

This chapter is the second of the two data chapters. This chapter presents a description of the perceptions and experiences of the nurse educators' teaching practice related to sexuality in undergraduate nursing education.

Chapter Six: A Model of Practice Related to Sexuality in Nursing Education

A discussion and integration of the findings from the literature with the findings of the study is presented in this chapter. As a result of these findings, a nursing model for practice related to sexuality has been developed and the findings are discussed within the framework of this model.

Chapter Seven: The Study in Conclusion

Chapter Seven draws the findings into a cohesive conclusion by addressing the aims of the study and the research questions. Recommendations for practice in nursing education are discussed and suggestions for further research are offered.