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THE EFFECT OF PRE-INFORMATION ON CLINICAL INFERENCE
AND NURSING ACTIONS

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ABSTRACT

A study to examine the effects of pre-information (what a nurse learns about a patient before they meet) on clinical inference and nursing actions, in a simulated nurse-patient situation. It was hypothesised that the nature of the pre-information will influence the way the patient is perceived, and the resulting nursing actions. The research was conducted in an obstetrical setting. There were 55 subjects within three groups. Two groups comprised student midwives, and the third group was of second year comprehensive nursing students near the completion of clinical experience in maternal and child health nursing. A five minute videotape sequence of a role-played post-natal patient was made for use in the research. All subjects were given the same initial pre-information, viewed the videotape and gave written descriptions of what they saw on the videotape and their response (as the nurse in the situation). This data provided a base-line for each subject. Subjects were then given additional pre-information concerning the patient's physical condition, her baby's condition, or formed part of the control group (receiving no additional pre-information). The procedure was repeated. These responses were then compared with the base-line for each subject.

Responses were coded by means of content analysis. Group data was analysed using a multivariate one way analysis of variance graphical display. The results indicated support of the hypothesis that the nature of the pre-information does influence the way in which a nurse perceives a patient, and resulting nursing actions. Implications of these findings for nursing are discussed.

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INTRODUCTION

Nursing practice is in the process of undergoing many changes. Today, perhaps more than at any other time nurses are questioning their previously accepted activities, looking for answers to formerly unasked questions, and seeking understanding of the different processes involved in the area of nurse-patient relationships.

While the traditional focus in nursing was on seeing and doing rather than on thinking there is now a need for nurses to consider cognitive as well as perceptual and motor skills. In the past the cognitive characteristics of nursing have not been dealt with in any systematic way. This is reflected in the fact that it is only recently that a major text-book on nursing (Beland & Passos, 1975) has identified and emphasised various cognitive tasks within nursing.

Consideration of the effects of pre-information, or what a nurse learns about a patient before they meet, on clinical inference and nursing actions is primarily a study of some of the cognitive functions of nursing. Only limited literature exists at present on the application of these cognitive functions to nursing practice, however, the rapid advancement in social science disciplines has meant that a wider source of theoretical knowledge is available.

The contributions of psychologists in areas of perception (especially person perception), cue-selection and utilisation, role expectation and stereotyping are particularly relevant to the development of this paper. It is proposed to examine these writings in some depth along with the available nursing literature to provide a background for understanding the effects that the nature of the pre-information received may have on both the manner in which a nurse perceives a patient and the resulting nursing actions.