Recognizing Questions

This is a Brief Online Learning Tutorial (or BOLT) brought to you by the LISTEN project, a HRSA funded project focusing on improving the information literacy competencies of nursing students and professional nurses.
Nurses must first begin the evidence-based nursing process by recognizing questions. Questions come and go in every busy healthcare facility. We rarely stop to think about the kinds of questions that we deal with or where to find the answers to those questions. This BOLT will help you to learn about recognizing questions.
What do you do when you have a clinical question? The LISTEN Project’s goal is to move you away from the historical tendency to rely on hearsay, opinion, and otherwise non-scientific data when seeking information related to patient care and practice protocols. We will give you an appreciation of the importance of using the best available scientific evidence to form the answers to your question by using the knowledge base of health care.
Patient data is probably the most obvious source of questions, including missing or incomplete information about a specific person’s history, physical examination, or laboratory tests. Examples include: age, past medical history, physical findings, and diagnostic test results. Not surprisingly, the sources for answers are most likely to be found in the patient’s chart, in the patient’s medical record, or by talking to family or friends. Questions that occur in this area often lead to broader questions that cannot be answered by the patient’s chart, family and friends, or the patient’s medical record, but must be answered using the medical literature, such as CINAHL or PubMed/MEDLINE.
Population statistics are usually the knowledge that nurses may be aware of as part of their work. “Is there a flu going around?” is often how this kind of information request is framed. Much of it is personal knowledge, but the prevalence and incidence of diseases can also be found in the health care literature. Another source of knowledge might be available by contacting the local public health department, or searching the database at the Centers for Disease Control.
Information that is generalizable to the care of all patients is far and away the most common kind of information that we need. It is the kind that is answered by original research or systematic reviews found in databases like CINAHL or PubMed/MEDLINE. Questions may be about textbook categories of etiology, pathophysiology, clinical manifestations, diagnosis and differential diagnosis, treatment, and prevention. For example, are there new drugs to treat a particular disease?
There are moments in every aspect of patient care when we feel the lack of knowledge and the need to pursue an answer to a question. When we become aware of that we are “stuck,” that is to say when we realize that we don’t know something, then that is the time to examine the question, put it into an answerable form, and to look for an answer in the most appropriate information resource.
Continue to visit the LISTEN website, at listenuphealth.org, for more helpful tips on using technology and seeking, evaluating, and applying information in nursing to support evidence-based nursing practice.
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