

The Basics of Cultural Competence: A Conversation with Barbara Nichols



The term “cultural competency” encompasses a great deal of research and scholarly thinking, and requires both learning and practicing. It can sound like an overwhelming concept to take in, particularly considering how many different cultures there are worldwide, and the fact that each individual within a culture is just that: one person, with unique feelings and perspectives on their own cultural beliefs and values.

But the idea behind cultural competence is not to learn everything about all cultures, but to learn how to be *aware* – aware that there may not necessarily be one way of doing things, or one way of perceiving a situation. It is about accepting and embracing diversity and being empowered by those differences to provide the best patient care and advocacy possible as a nurse.

I asked Barbara L. Nichols, CEO of the Commission on Graduates of Foreign Nursing Schools and author of over 70 publications on nursing and health care delivery to help simplify the concept.

– Paul Padilla, BTN Director

Q. What is cultural competency?

A. Cultural competence is based on a body of knowledge derived from scientific and behavioral information about culture, ethnicity, and race. It describes how to best meet the needs of an increasingly diverse patient population and how to effectively advocate for them.

Q. Why is cultural competency important in the nurses' workplace?

A. Globalization, changing demographics and disparities in health care make it imperative that nurses in the workplace be culturally competent.

Globalization is defined as a process that extends across borders to provide programs and/or services. It includes the transfer of knowledge, goods, and people. Because of the worldwide nursing shortage, nurses are on the move globally, providing their practice, knowledge, and skills beyond their home country. As the global nursing workforce is ethnically transformed, information about culture, ethnicity and race become essential components of health care *and* the professional development of nurses.

Q. How can staff nurses and nurse managers model cultural competency?

A. In order to model cultural competency, nurses must be culturally aware, have knowledge of self and others, strong communication skills and positive attitudes and behaviors in interaction with patients and families.

Q. What kinds of programs are available for cultural competency in-service education?

A. The reports, documents and guidelines issued by the following groups identify concepts, policies, and practices that can be used in in-service programs: (See the information box for the websites of these resources).

- Office of Minority Health Report, “Teaching Cultural Competence in Health Care”
- American Psychological Association (APA)
- American Medical Association (AMA)
- National Association of Social Workers (NASW)
- Institute of Medicine (IOM)

- Transcultural Nursing Society

Q. What recommendations do you have for individual nurses and nursing students to become more culturally aware?

A. Nurses and students must understand that cultural competence includes developing attitudes of respect and appreciation for individual and cultural differences. In their day-to-day work, nurses must confront stereotypes

about ethnic minorities. This is accomplished by obtaining a knowledge base that includes ethnic health indices, socio-cultural aspects of health, and assessment techniques adapted to cultural diversity in communities, and by improving communication of health prevention and promotion in ethnic and culturally relevant ways.

for more on cultural competence...

Commission on Graduates of Foreign
Nursing Schools
www.cgfns.org

Office of Minority Health
www.omhrc.org

The American Psychological Association (APA)
www.apa.org/monitor/julaug05/care.html

The American Medical Association (AMA)
www.ama-assn.org/ama/pub/category/10352.html

The National Association of Social Workers
(NASW)
www.socialworkers.org/da/da2005/policies0505/documents/cultural.pdf

www.socialworkers.org/sections/credentials/cultural_comp.asp

The Institute of Medicine (IOM)
www.iom.edu/CMS/18007.aspx

University of Buffalo – Cultural Competence
Resources
<http://ublib.buffalo.edu/libraries/units/hsl/resources/guides/culturalcompetence.html>

bio



Barbara L. Nichols, DHL, MS, RN, FAAN, is Chief Executive Officer of the Commission on Graduates of Foreign Nursing Schools. Dr. Nichols is a past president of the American Nurses' Association (ANA), and is the author of over 70 publications on nursing and health care delivery and has received numerous awards for contributions to the nursing profession.

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