

The Smile as a Promoting Instrument of Comfort in Hospitalized Patients: A Literature Review

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Abstract

Background and objectives: In their daily practice, nurses use communication strategies that allow them to provide humanized nursing care, especially the smile, as a way of establishing an empathic relationship and promoting comfort. Thus, with this integrative literature review, we intended to analyze how smile can be a promoting instrument of comfort in hospitalized patients. Data sources: The studies included in this review resulted from an indexed search in the following databases CINAHL®, Nursing & Allied Health, Cochrane, Medic Latina, MEDLINE® and SciELO, as well as in libraries at Universities and Nursing Schools. Review Methods: The study was developed as an integrative literature review in which six studies were selected and duly analyzed. Results: Of the six selected studies, two were conducted in Portugal (Lisbon), three in Brazil (São Paulo, João Pessoa and Rio de Janeiro) and one in Australia; they include the results of a doctoral thesis, a systematic literature review, and four qualitative analysis works. All studies, except the systematic literature review, resulted from observation or interviews with nurses. Conclusions: This study demonstrates that smile is an instrument of non-verbal communication used by nurses as a strategy to promote comfort. It contributes to the establishment of an empathic relationship and to the provision of humanized nursing care.

Keywords: smile, communication, nursing, comfort.

1. Introduction

A hospitalized patient experiences stressful situations that often relate to the fear of the unknown, the difficulty in understanding a complex and technical language, the concern with his/her physical integrity, the concern with his/her pathology, or the adaptation to a different environment where, sometimes, the patient is deprived of his/her identity (Oria et al., 2004). The interaction established between the patients and the hospital setting, especially with nurses, can help patients with their health status, by enabling them to adapt to the changes in their daily lives and to react with flexibility to the treatments. The health professionals' attention is focused mainly on the disease, which makes them act in a rather technical way, and not on the patient, who becomes deprived of his/her individuality (Morais et al., 2009). As such, the existence of a balance between technology and the care centered in the individual, as a unique being with his/her own needs, is fundamental. In this sense, nurses must be able to combine the following three aspects of performance: the scientific aspect, the technical aspect and the relational aspect; and the following three dimensions of knowledge: "know what to do", "know how to be" and "know how to act".

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In turn, the therapeutic humor — of which the smile is part of — becomes vital in the practice of care, since it can constitute an “analgesic” in many situations of suffering, especially when it comes to patients in a hospital environment (Louro & Sousa, 2014). It is crucial the existence of a therapeutic alliance between the health professional and the patient, where nursing care is centered on a philosophy of humanity, on the individual, on the patient’s individuality, on a holistic dimension, taking into account the physical, the psychological and the social aspects that affect the process of health/disease (Morais, 2009). Providing humanized nursing care requires the availability to understand the other, the ability to listen and to dialogue, to meet the needs of the other. That is, it requires an act of solidarity and an attitude of helping the other (Simões, 2008). Establishing a relationship of trust is essential in the caring process. The nurses’ availability promotes security, trust and complicity, creating a caregiver/carereceiver relation in a “co-constructed” process, covered with intentionality (Sousa, 2014). Communication is, thus, an important strategy, promotor of humanized nursing care and comfort.

The nurse must be alert to the messages transmitted by the patient, which may be verbal or non-verbal. Among other features, non-verbal communication includes: physical traits, posture, gestures, voice, touch and smile (Phaneuf, 2005). The author also considers that the smile can be a facilitating element of comfort, in the establishment of a relationship of trust, being an attribute of man and, therefore, of humanity (Phaneuf, 2002; Sousa, 2014). In the perspective of Ford (2009), the smile — with respect to nursing care — operates as a facilitator of confidence and encouragement, also providing a feeling of greater support and guidance to the patient and, therefore, acting as a promotor of comfort. Based on the previous assumptions, this integrative literature review intends to answer the following guiding question: How does the smile act as a promoting instrument of comfort in hospitalized patients?

2. Method

The research method applied to this work consists on the integrative review of literature. This includes the reading, analysis and synthesis of published studies regarding the subject of smile as a promoting instrument of comfort in hospitalized patients, in order to contribute to the improvement of the clinical practice using scientific knowledge as its base. The integrative literature review encompasses seven stages: 1) identification of the subject and selection of the hypothesis or research question, for the elaboration of the integrative review; 2) establishment of criteria for inclusion and exclusion of studies, sampling and literature search; 3) definition of the information to be extracted from the selected studies; 4) categorization of the studies; 5) evaluation of the studies included in the integrative review; 6) interpretation of the results; 7) presentation of the review/knowledge synthesis (Mendes, Silveira & Galvão, 2008). The articles’ selection criteria took into account the objective of the study, and also articles related to smile as a strategy to promote comfort in hospitalized patients, which were indexed in the CINAHL®, Nursing & Allied Health, Cochrane, Medic Latina, MEDLINE® and SciELO databases.

The articles’ search occurred in the period ranging from September to October 2016. The inclusion criteria used in this study were: publications in Portuguese, English and Spanish that were published between 2010 and 2016. The exclusion criteria defined for this review were: studies carried out in neonatology, or pediatrics, and mental illness. The descriptors applied were selected using the “Health Sciences Descriptors” (“*Descritores em Ciências da Saúde*”, or *DeCS*, in portuguese) and the “Medical Subject Heading” (MESH): smile, communication and nursing. For the development of the study, an exhaustive reading of the titles and abstracts was carried out and, later, the reading of the integral texts was performed, in order to answer the question of this research.

3. Results and discussion

The collection of data requires the location of the scientific studies, a process that is steered by the following guiding question: “In what way is smile a promoting instrument of comfort in hospitalized patients?” The results that follow show the importance of smile as a strategy to promote comfort to hospitalized patients (Table 1).

Table 1: Description of the studies' selection and their main results

Title	Author	Source	Type of study	Results
The nature of the comfort process of the elderly chronic patient in a hospital context. Elaboration of an explanatory theory.	Pontífice-Sousa (2012)	Portugal (Lisbon)	Doctoral thesis. Ethnographic study.	The smile emerges as a comforting strategy, allowing establishing a mechanism of connection. The smile stands out as a form of important non-verbal communication, due to the warm affection it transmits to the individual, being also the facial expression that best breaks down barriers and brings people together.
Communication strategies used by health professionals when providing care to patients undergoing palliative care	Araújo et al. (2012)	Brazil (São Paulo)	Qualitative, descriptive, non-random. Sample consisting of 303 health professionals.	The eye contact and the smile are facial traits that denote interest and facilitate interaction with patients.
The smile as a communication strategy in nursing: contributions to a systematic literature review.	Louro et al. (2014)	Portugal (Lisbon)	Systematic literature review	The smile is a therapeutic instrument, which leads to manifestations of comfort and confidence in the provided care.
A narrative inquiry: How do nurses respond to patients' use of humor?	Haydon et al. (2014)	Australia	Qualitative, Exploratory, semi-structured interview with nurses	Humor is an important communication tool for the patients. Not only humanizes the nurses, it also creates bonding and opens communication between them and the patients.
Strategies to humanize care provided to the hospitalized elderly: a study carried out with nursing assistants	Dias et al. (2015)	Brazil (João Pessoa)	Qualitative, exploratory, conducted with 15 nurses	The satisfaction of health service users is directly related to the attributes of the professional, such as offering a smile, greeting the patient when receiving it (...) this type of communication facilitates the offer of a humanized care to the elderly patient.
Body expressions in care: a contribution to the communication in nursing	Rezende et al. (2015)	Brazil (Rio de Janeiro)	Qualitative, with systematic observation of 21 nurses from two hospitals	The laughter stood out among the sound expressions, being present in the contacts between the team members and the patients, in moments of interaction, for a more qualified and humanized care.

In their studies, Araújo et al. (2012) and Rezende et al. (2015) analyze interpersonal communication strategies that facilitate interaction with the patient, emphasizing smile as a way of transmitting attention, compassion and comfort, establishing a relationship of trust and promoting more qualified and humanized nursing care. The same idea is conveyed by Louro et al. (2014), who highlight non-verbal communication, namely the smile, as being highly relevant in an aid relationship.

In her doctoral thesis, Pontífice-Sousa (2012) found that verbal communication is not always the most significant, since the smile constitutes an important form of non-verbal communication that transmits a warm affection to the individual. Regarding the perception of affectivity through smile, although the facial expression is not always in agreement with the emotional state and feelings of the individual, in the nurse-patient relationship it is the most common way to demonstrate emotions, allowing, therefore, to establish a mechanism of connection (Pontífice-Sousa, 2012).

In this line of thought, Dias et al. (2015) argues that facial expression is the most valued by patients, because it transmits important messages that may facilitate the care process, promoting a therapeutic relationship marked by intentionality. A smile attracts other smiles. It is the facial expression that best breaks barriers and brings people together, and can have a positive effect on people who feel sad and depressed (Pontífice-Sousa, 2012). In the interaction between caregivers and care receivers, it is noticed that, associated with the smile, the use of humor is considered an important tool in the communication process, reducing anxiety, stress and the constraints resulting from hospitalization (Haydon et al., 2014), having a positive effect on health. This opinion is also shared by Pontífice-Sousa (2012), who emphasizes that, in a context of social interaction, the balanced conjugation of humor/smile is often used by the nursing team to deepen a therapeutic relationship and to help the patient to deal with his/her situation in a more positive way.

The interpersonal relationship is carried out through communicability. The consulted texts emphasize the importance of the smile in the establishment of a relationship of trust, with a positive attitude, being essential for a comforting and more humanized care. This translates into a humanistic interpersonal relationship that consolidates the professional action, resulting in an effective posture. The latter manifests itself in a performance that influences the quality of the comforting relationship.

4. Conclusions

We can state that non-verbal communication is crucial to the affective dimension of nursing, especially in the comforting interaction. Through this literature review, it became clear the role of the smile as a comfort promoting strategy, providing hospitalized patients with a more humanized nursing care. Although there are only a few studies on this subject, its analysis is considered of special importance, given the beneficial implications to the establishment of an intentional therapeutic relationship that contributes to the quality of life and the health of the patients. It is, therefore, necessary to carry out further studies in this field.

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