Narrative Writing: Its Role in Nursing Literature
Lois Gerber

Narrative writing has an important role in nursing literature. It can foster professionalism, educate, inspire, and clarify (Mitiguy 2011). Nursing narratives can depict the nursing role in an authentic manner and supplement the scholarly focus of academic and clinically based articles, those that provide the strong scientific base for nursing practice (Oermann & Hays 2011). Narrative stories, often written in the first person, are personal, dramatic, and descriptive and can incorporate dialogue. They may encompass feelings, define how patients benefit from nursing care, and describe the insights the nurse author gained from the experience (Mitiguy 2011). Nursing stories make the profession come alive.

How Nursing Narratives Benefit Patients and the General Public

Storytelling serves universal needs. Narratives deliver a clearer message to most readers than other forms of writing (Hart 2011). A well-constructed story is a powerful, non-threatening, and informal teaching tool that makes learning fun.

Nurses have the skills to write in an interesting and meaningful manner, in part because they can easily and accurately describe people’s emotional and physical states (Berg 1999, Mitiguy 2011). They have learned to ask intelligent questions, uncover deep emotional truths, and solve complex problems. Many nurses love to tell colorful tales, and most use them to teach patients about health maintenance and disease management. Putting these stories in writing to inspire and teach others is a nursing responsibility.

Since nurses’ anecdotes usually revolve around core nursing principles, they are easily understood by all nurses regardless of practice setting or educational level. Nursing narratives help unify the profession and act as bridges between nurses, other health care professionals, and clients. Stories are particularly effective when logical statements would initiate arguments (Pipher 2006).

Well written stories that highlight nursing knowledge, competence, and caring can reach beyond the nursing community into the general population and enhance the public image of the professional role. With the passage of the Affordable Health Care Act in the USA, patients may see fewer physicians and interact with more nurses and nurse practitioners. Nurses will be the ones to introduce and implement the expanded nursing role and monitor that the changes in patient care are smoothly integrated into the practice setting (Hut 2012). Nursing narratives are an important tool to facilitate this process.

How Nursing Narratives Benefit the Individual Nurse

On a daily basis, most direct care nurses deal with powerful feelings related to illness, injury, and death. Writing about the personal impact of these experiences provides an outlet for emotional expression and a means to gain insight into core beliefs, behaviors, and biases. Examples of the appropriate use of humor, a subtle but invaluable technique in therapeutic communication, can be illustrated in creatively written stories through the use of dialogue. Information can be presented...
objectively and subjectively. An end result of nurses putting pen to paper may be more productive nurse-client relationships, improved compliance with evidence-based practice guidelines, and stronger critical thinking skills.

Writing stories about their work experiences will help nurses define and prioritize professional goals and provide the motivation to pursue them. Nurses, 94.4 % of them women (Baker 2012), are often conflicted by work and family responsibilities. Narratives written by veteran nurses that describe their experiences and insights can act as exemplars for younger ones who are still adjusting to the multi-dimensional nursing role. Well-crafted stories also can be useful teaching tools for nurses in any stage of their careers. Stories help people extend their circle of caring and teach them about themselves. Pipher (2006) compares writing narrative to empathy training.

Poems and songs, lyrical ways to express deep feelings, also can be informative, meaningful, and a powerful tool to connect and teach. Well-written lyrics can express universal ideas in plain precise language (Pipher 2006).

**How Nursing Narratives Benefit the Profession**

Composing creative narratives forces nurses to move beyond the succinct phrases used to document patient care to writing with grammatically correct sentence structure and punctuation. Story writing can be a stepping stone to authoring evidenced-based, clinical practice, and/or research manuscripts, all important to advance the scientific basis of nursing practice (Oermann & Hay 2011).

Many of today’s television shows and movies portray nursing as more glamorous and exciting than it really is. Often individuals enter the field with unrealistic expectations. Estimates are 10.4% of newly licensed nurses leave their first job within a year. Fifty-five percent change jobs within six and a half years (RN Work Project 2011). While most newly licensed nurses do not leave the profession, this high turnover can affect patient care and is a huge cost and source of frustration to employers. High school and beginning college students who read well written nursing stories will gain accurate information about the demands and responsibilities of the profession, learn about its many diverse career opportunities, and choose the specialty most suited to them.

**How to Begin to Write Creatively**

Nurse authors need to find a personal space to write, either at home, a library, or work setting. The story topic should be something the nurse is familiar with or feels passionately about. They then can choose the best way to express the idea—a story, poem, jingle, or song. Adding drama and description to the piece can make it more powerful. Authenticity is important (Berg 1999).

Many find writing short pieces, 500 words or less about a personal and meaningful experience between the patient and the nurse, is an easy way to begin. A prospective nurse author can join a local or online writing group to share writing experiences, critique other members’ work, and offer advice and support. To be effective, writing group members must be willing to offer honest constructive criticism along with constructive ideas for improvement. These groups, which may include published authors, meet in libraries, book stores, and schools.

New writers must realize that writing for publication in peer-reviewed journals or nationally distributed magazines likely will require several revisions of the original first draft. Most writers spend more time revising than anything else.

Nurses are well aware of the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA) guidelines and know the importance of following confidentiality guidelines when writing about a client or family. Ethical considerations prohibit any identifying personal information to be put in print, even in a story
(Brent 2011). Ways to resolve this dilemma are to obtain written consent from the patient; change the patient’s name, setting, and other characteristics; and make the narrative a composite story of several patients, not just one. These techniques allow the author to maintain the core of the situation. If the story is to be published, the author should clarify this with the editor, who may want a signed waiver from the client.

Nursing stories can be posted on a blog or social media site, submitted to a professional journal, or sent to a consumer magazine for publication. Blog writing is instant self-publication that often emphasizes self-reflection and social commentary and inspires back and forth interaction (Pipher 2006). Because blogs can reach millions of people, they are an easy and effective way for nurses to communicate and connect with others. Short columns for local nursing association publications and/or community association bulletins, letters to local congressmen, and opinion pieces for newspaper's editorial pages are other ways to flex one’s writing muscles.

Cortney Davis (n d), a nurse practitioner, author and poet, writes deep and meaningful prose about the profession and her patients. Elizabeth Berg (1999), another successful non-fiction and fiction author, was a registered nurse for ten years before writing professionally. Both nurses’ descriptions of people and the integration of health issues into their story plots come from their nursing experiences. Creative writing gives nurses the opportunity to share their knowledge with others, often on a worldwide basis. As Davis (n d) states, “For me, nursing, like writing, is that human place in which nurturing and mystery meet.”

Narrative writing: it’s a way to communicate and a way to care.

References


Author

Lois Gerber, MPH, RN, BSN, is a nurse author from Port Orange, Florida, USA.
Emails: lgerberrn@aol.com and commcts@aol.com.