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Nursing Education in Sri Lanka Challenges and Vision for the Future

Dr Rasika S. Jayasekara
RN,BA, BScN (Hons), PGDipEdu, MNSc, MClinSc, PhD
Senior Lecturer
School of Nursing & Midwifery
University of South Australia
Adelaide SA 5000, Australia

Dr Thamara D. Amarasekara,
RN, BScN (Hons), DipTeac & Sup, PGDipEdu, PhD
Senior Lecturer
Department of Allied Health Sciences, Faculty of Medical
Sciences, University of Sri Jaywardenepura
Nugegoda 10250, Sri Lanka

Abstract

Background

In Sri Lanka, pre-registration nursing education is moving from diploma level to a university bachelor degree in consistent with many countries around the world. In this transitional stage, understanding of the evolution and existing situation of nursing education in Sri Lanka provides perspective on the origins of current successes and dilemmas, and enables the development of strategies and plans for future trends in the profession.

Method

The literature search was conducted using MEDLINE and CINAHL and limited to articles in the English and Sinhala languages publication until 2014. Personal communication, unpublished reports and government records and web sites were used to obtain information on nursing education in Sri Lanka. The reference list of all identified reports and articles was searched for additional studies. Hand searching of relevant Sri Lankan journals and government reports was undertaken to reveal any additional literature.

Discussion

This review explores evolution and existing situation of nursing education and its impact on developing professionalism in nursing. Major challenges for the nursing profession in Sri Lanka are discussed with some recommendations, enabling the identification and development of an appropriate policy direction.

Keywords: *Nursing, Education,, Curriculum development, Evidence based practice, Sri Lanka*

I. INTRODUCTION

Health care is changing dramatically because of advances in medical sciences and technology, new discoveries in clinical research and the greater demands of consumers. For nursing, as a key profession in healthcare provision, these changes represent a significant challenge in terms of maintaining the quality of services and preparing nurses for the future [1]. The World Health Organization Global Advisory Group in 1992 recommended that, when appropriate, countries should move basic nursing education to university standards [2]. This view was supported by many countries around the world, moving from hospital-based apprenticeship training to university-based education, enabling the acquisition of bachelor degree

education as a minimum preparation for beginning professional nursing practice [3, 4]. It is evident that bachelor of nursing (baccalaureate-nursing) graduates acquire unique skills as clinicians and demonstrate an important role in the delivery of safe patient care [4, 5].

In Sri Lanka, pre-registration nursing education is currently based on a three-year diploma level nursing program in schools of nursing that are attached to the Ministry of Health and four-year bachelor programs in nursing at universities. The government policy is that nursing education should be based on the four-year undergraduate nursing program [6]. In response, the University Grant Commission of Sri Lanka has approved four-year Bachelor of Science in Nursing programs (BScN) in government universities. In addition to the proposed affiliation of existing schools of nursing to the university sector, several other universities including the Open University proposed to establish similar programs in the future [1]. Understanding of the evolution and existing situation of nursing education in Sri Lanka provides perspective on the origins of current successes and dilemmas, and enables the development of strategies and trends for future trends in the profession. This review explores trends and issues of nursing education in Sri Lanka and its impact on developing professionalism in nursing. Major challenges for the nursing profession in Sri Lanka are discussed with some recommendations, enabling the identification and development of an appropriate policy direction.

II. METHOD

The literature search was conducted using MEDLINE and CINAHL and limited to articles in the English and Sinhala languages publication until 2014. Personal communication, unpublished reports and government records and web sites were used to obtain information on nursing education in Sri Lanka. The reference list of all identified reports and articles was searched for additional studies. Hand searching of relevant Sri Lankan journals and government reports was undertaken to reveal any additional literature.

III. NURSING EDUCATION IN SRI LANKA

Internationally, the major trend in nursing education is the move from hospital-based apprenticeship training to university-based education, enabling the acquisition of bachelor degree education as a minimum preparation for beginning professional nursing practice. The view that nursing education should be

based in the university sector was supported in most developed countries (e.g. Australia, New Zealand, and Canada). In South-East Asia region, most countries have established university education for nurses; however the progress is very slow due to unique social, economic and political situations experienced by these states [7, 8]. Nursing programs offered in South-East Asia are listed in (Table I).

TABLE I : NURSING PROGRAMS OFFERED IN SOUTH-EAST ASIA

Country	General Nursing (3-year)	Post-basic Bachelor (2-year)	Bachelor's degree (4-year)	Masters degree (2-3 years)	Doctoral degree (3-year)
Bangladesh	X (4y)	X			
Bhutan	X	X			
DPR Korea	X				
India	X		X	X	X
Indonesia	X	X	X	X	
Maldives	X				
Myanmar	X	X	X	X	
Nepal		X	X	X	
Sri Lanka	X	X	X		
Thailand			X	X	X
Timor-	X				

Source: WHO-ROSEA [9]

In Sri Lanka, nursing education is currently taking place in separate nursing schools and universities. Being government institutions, schools of nursing are attached to the Ministry of Health (MOH), while universities are managed by the University Grant Commission (UGC) and Ministry of Higher Education in Sri Lanka. Currently, pre-registration nursing education in Sri Lanka is based on a three-year diploma level nursing program in schools of nursing and four-year Bachelor of Science (B.Sc.) in nursing programs at universities. The post-registration nursing education is taking place in the Post Basic College of Nursing in Colombo. Although there was a Master of Nursing Science (MNSc) program during 2000-2002, currently there is no postgraduate nursing program in Sri Lanka. There are large numbers of private sector nursing schools, however, these are not considered as recognised nursing schools by the MOH and the Sri Lanka Nursing Council due to inconsistency of program durations and standards.

PRE-REGISTRATION DIPLOMA NURSING EDUCATION IN SCHOOLS OF NURSING

Early nursing services were influenced strongly by the British nursing tradition characterised by an apprenticeship style of nurse training [10]. Hospital based nursing education in Sri Lanka adopted this apprenticeship model, however this model has since been replaced by the transfer of nursing education into separate nursing schools. The first institutionalised nurse training commenced in 1939 with the establishment of the School of Nursing in Colombo [11]. In 2014, 16 schools of nursing throughout the country provide a

three year diploma level pre-registration nursing education. Schools of nursing follow a national level curriculum that provides a national framework for nursing schools' education in Sri Lanka. The current three-year nursing curriculum consists of 20 theory courses based on traditional medical model subjects such as medical, surgical, paediatric, psychiatric, and maternal nursing. The major aim of this program is to prepare general nurses for employment in the national health care system.

PRE-REGISTRATION B.SC. NURSING PROGRAMS IN UNIVERSITIES

The University of Ceylon proposed a five-year nursing diploma program in 1963 [12], however the program was not implemented. University education for Sri Lankan nurses was next advocated in 1968 [13] and was supported by The International Council of Nurses and the World Health Organisation, who recommended that nurse education should be based on the higher tertiary education system [14]. However, it was not until 1994 that university education for nurses was introduced in Sri Lanka [15]. Several proposals for establishing university based education for nurses had been proposed by nursing leaders and authorities but were not acted on. (e.g. "The case for an undergraduate program in nursing in the University of Ceylon" (1967); "A narrative program proposal for the development of a baccalaureate degree program in nursing at the University of Sri Lanka" (1977) [12].

Currently, there are two types of nursing degree programs available in Sri Lanka. Five conventional universities in Sri Lanka have established pre-registration degree programs leading to B.Sc. in Nursing. The Open University provides a B.Sc. in nursing program for registered nurses of the Ministry of Health, Sri Lanka as a post-registration program. This program provides registered nurses an opportunity to upgrade their current qualification to degree level. Recently this program widens its capacity to offer the degree to students who had completed their high school (GCE A/L) in Science and Mathematics streams [16].

The National Health Policy (1992) proposed that nursing education should be upgraded to the degree level [6]. This recommendation was reiterated in The National Strategic Plan for Nursing and Midwifery Development (NSPNMD) 2001-2010). As a result, the University Grants Commission (UGC) in Sri Lanka has established a four-year degree programs leading to B.Sc. in Nursing in five universities (University of Sri-Jayewardenepura [2005], University of Peradeniya [2006], Eastern University [2006], University of Jaffna [2006] and University of Ruhuna [2008]). However, the UGC instructed universities to redesign a curriculum for a three year general degree with an additional one year for those students who wish to pursue a special degree.

The first pre-registration B.Sc. Nursing program was commenced in the University of Sri-Jayewardenepura. The Faculty of Medical Sciences at the University of Sri-Jayewardenepura was established in 1992 to provide undergraduate education in medicine, nursing and other allied health sciences. The four-year BSc in Nursing degree program

was commenced on August 2005. Currently, 10 lecturers are appointed to this program and four of them have Master degrees in nursing and one PhD academic. The annual intake of students is 25.

In 2000, University of Peradeniya proposed to establish a nursing school at the Faculty of Medicine [17]. However, the government decided to commence university B.Sc. programs in selected universities for allied health sciences including nursing in university admission for 2005/2006 [18]. University of Peradeniya enrolled allied health students into the Faculty of Medicine in 2006; however these programs were not fully functional due to various reasons (e.g. a lack of nurse lecturers, objection of medical students). Subsequently, the UGC approved a new Faculty for Allied Health Sciences for the University of Peradeniya and it was inaugurated on January 2007. The new faculty consists of five departments that offer undergraduate programs in nursing, pharmacy, physiotherapy, radiotherapy/radiography and medical laboratory sciences. The aim of the B.Sc. Nursing program is to enable the student, through a mix of theoretical and practice-based modules, to become compassionate, caring, competent and critically aware practitioners of nursing [19]. Currently most courses of allied health degree programs are managed by medical lecturers due to a dearth of qualified allied health professionals in the country. However, a total number of 187 students are currently enrolled in the B.Sc. Nursing program.

In 2005, the UGC approved a new Faculty for Healthcare Sciences at the Eastern University of Sri Lanka to establish health science degrees [20]. This Faculty offers mainly of two courses of studies: Medicine (MBBS) and Nursing (BSc). Currently 67 nursing students are enrolled to the BSc Nursing program. BSc Nursing program at University of Ruhuna was initiated by the committee appointed by the Board of the Faculty of Medicine, University of Ruhuna on 27th March 2001 and currently 142 students are enrolled. In 2004, a special Faculty Board meeting held at the Faculty of Medicine, University of Jaffna made the decision to commence the three allied health degree courses including nursing and Allied Health Sciences Unit under the Faculty of Medicine was established on 7th August 2006 [21]. According to the UGC, above five universities offer degree programs leading to B.Sc. in Nursing with total of 205 students for 2014 intake [22]. In addition, Sri Lanka's Defence University, General Sir John Kotelawala Defence University recently established a Faculty of Allied Health Sciences (FAHS) and the FAHS had its first intake of civil students admitted in January 2013 to its undergraduate course programs in Nursing, Physiotherapy, Pharmacy, Medical Laboratory Sciences and Radiography.

POST RN BSC NURSING PROGRAM

In Sri Lanka, the first nursing degree program was established at the Open University of Sri Lanka (OUSL) in 1994 under the Department of Health Sciences of the Faculty of Natural Sciences. Academic assistance was provided by the Athabasca University, Canada through a 5-year programme funded by the Canadian International Development Agency (1992-1997). This program prepares generalist nurses for leadership roles in hospitals and the community, administration, supervision, teaching and research within the

context of current health needs[23]. This post RN degree program is offered by distance mode for registered nurses with a minimum of 2 years' experience. The first 2 years of the degree programme at Levels 3 & 4 are exempted for registered nurses (who would otherwise have to follow the course for 4 academic years). They are required to pursue only the final 2 years of the program at Levels 5 & 6. A curriculum for Levels 3-4 has already been approved for implementation in the four-year nursing degree program that recruits high school graduates [24]

The Post RN B.Sc. nursing degree has 13 compulsory courses along with an open elective under which six courses are offered [23]. The students have the option of selecting any course of their choice from these six courses. The curriculum of the program is guided by the principles of primary healthcare as outlined by the WHO in 1998 [23]. However, a curriculum review team noted that the curriculum has not been revised since its inception in 1994 [24]. In 2001, a Canadian nursing consultant revised five courses of this curriculum and subsequently recommended a review of another two courses, however it was not possible due to inadequate funds, staff and subject experts [24]. The curriculum review team also noted that only 204 out of 500 registered students have completed their degree from 1997 to 2005 [24]. The possible reasons for this situation may be the distance mode of study, which produces challenges for many students because of workload, the language of instruction (English), the teaching-learning methodology, and their own personal and professional commitments [25].

The following table provide details of all BSc Nursing programs in Sri Lanka (Table II).

TABLE II : BSC NURSING PROGRAMS IN SRI LANKA

University	No of current students	Total Academic staff	Nursing Academic staff qualifications (2014)		
			Bachelor's degree	Masters degree /MPhil	Doctoral degree
Open University of Sri Lanka	2819	7	7	2/1	0
University of Sri Ja'pura	84	10	10	2/2	1
University of Jaffna	60	4	4	1/1	0
University of Ruhuna	142	11	11	-/1	0
Eastern University	67	7	7	1/-	0
University of Peradeniya	187	6	6	1/1	-
Defence University	198	11	11	-	-

POST-REGISTRATION NURSING EDUCATION

The role of nursing changed dramatically with the development of nursing schools. As a result, the Post Basic School of Nursing (currently Post Basic College of Nursing)

was established in 1960 in the School of Nursing, Colombo. In addition to this school, the Eastern University of Sri Lanka established a similar program in 1997 that was funded by the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA) [26]. This program provides opportunities for remote area Tamil speaking nurses to access post basic nursing education.

These two institutions provide diploma level nursing education in Ward Management and Supervision program for registered nurses to become ward sisters (nurse managers). In addition, the Post Basic College of Nursing provides a Diploma in Teaching and Supervision program for registered nurses to become tutors (nurse educators) in schools of nursing. The duration of both programs is 18 months, including a six-month midwifery course for female nurses, and a six-month psychiatric nursing course for male nurses. The curricula of the post basic diploma have not been regularly updated and these courses do not reflect current needs of the profession at clinical and management levels [27]. Post basic nursing education is constrained in its ability to produce nurse managers and nurse tutors and to provide short courses for nurses in specialty areas such as intensive care, paediatric and infection control. However, it is recognised that post basic nursing education should be developed to provide specialist clinical nursing education to improve the quality of nursing care. The National Strategic Plan for Nursing and Midwifery Development (NSPNMD, 2001-2010) proposed that the Post Basic School of Nursing should be upgraded to a Postgraduate Institute of Nursing and Midwifery (PGINM) to improve postgraduate nursing and midwifery education and to establish clinical specialisations [28]. However, the Sri Lanka Health Ministry recently announced that the government has decided to uplift a major nursing school, the Post Basic College of Nursing as a degree awarding university for nursing and this school will be upgraded as a university campus affiliated to the Colombo University.

POSTGRADUATE NURSING EDUCATION

The absence of nursing from the university sector was a major constraint to establishing sound postgraduate nursing education in Sri Lanka. In response to this, in 2000 a Master of Nursing Science (MNSc) program was introduced as a three-year WHO sponsored project under the academic auspices of the University of Adelaide, South Australia. This program introduced an evidence-based approach to the nursing service in Sri Lanka [29]. The major aim of this program was to establish a future faculty for university nursing education; however this program was discontinued after the second intake due to inadequate coordination of accessing WHO funds for the program. As a result, 20 Masters-qualified nurses out of a proposed 30 completed the program. Many master graduates have obtained academic positions of above five universities and few nursing academics are currently enrolled for MPhil or doctoral programs with local and international universities. This number is not adequate compared to current and future needs of nursing programs in the Sri Lankan university sector. Urgent steps need to be taken to increase the number of postgraduate qualified nurse academics in the university sector

by establishing postgraduate research degree programs and providing scholarships and funds for research programs.

IV. CONCLUSION

Nursing education in Sri Lanka needs to reflect the contemporary needs of the nursing profession and current and future demands of healthcare. The following recommendations were developed from the findings of this study. They are designed to inform the planning process of nursing education for the country.

01. Recommendation: Consistency in scope of practice

A consistent national framework for undergraduate nursing education should be developed and implemented across all undergraduate nursing programs. This can be achieved by:

- Promoting a united, collaborative approach in developing a national nursing education framework that recognises the wider contribution of clinical, education, and administration sectors integrated with healthcare experts' and public opinions.
- Development of national nursing competency standards on the basis of a national framework of nursing education regulating the nursing profession through Sri Lanka Nursing Council.
- Development of a culturally and socially acceptable Code of Ethics and a Code of Conduct using international and local guidelines and evidence

02. Recommendation: Pre-registration nursing education

A policy decision should be made concerning the bachelor degree as a minimum preparation for beginning professional nursing practice. This can be achieved by:

- Expansion of existing 4-year Bachelor of Nursing programs that can absorb the expected number of nurses in the government and private healthcare sectors.
- Affiliation of existing nursing schools with the universities where appropriate integration of present nursing tutors into the university sector on the basis of their qualifications and experience.
- Expansion of existing Post RN Bachelor program at the Open University and establishing a pathway to degree programs (e.g. 2-year accelerated program) that enables current registered nurses to upgrade their qualifications.

03. Recommendation: Teaching and learning

It is essential that teaching and learning should be improved by enhancing nurse educators' knowledge and skills and incorporating modern teaching and learning strategies with modern technology. This can be achieved by:

- Increasing the quantity and quality of nurse educators by providing postgraduate education opportunities through local and international universities.
- Establishment of a postgraduate institute for nursing to increase the quality of the nursing workforce for the education, nursing practice, research and administration sectors.
- Increasing the use of modern teaching and learning strategies (e.g. student-centred learning, self-directed discovery learning) with educational technology and information technology.
- Promoting inter-disciplinary education among healthcare professionals, which promotes team development in healthcare institutions.
- Establishing a life-long learning culture that can be made possible through continuing education and introducing a renewal licensure system.
- Offering flexible educational delivery models that enable nurses from diverse geographical locations (rural and remote) to enhance their qualifications while keeping them in their clinical practice

04. Recommendation: Curricula content

It is important that nursing curricula should reflect the current needs of healthcare and the community and are culturally appropriate and economically feasible. This can be achieved by:

- Development of a culturally acceptable and economically feasible nursing care model that delivers holistic care for patients and primary healthcare for the community.
- Establishing national competency standards and a code of ethics in nursing curricula to ensure graduates are competent to practice safely and ethically in their professional nursing roles (e.g. as caregivers, advocators, educators, researchers).
- Integration of professional nursing skills (clinical, technical, critical thinking, leadership, information literacy and interpersonal skills) to enhance the nurses' decision-making abilities clinically, academically and socially.
- Increasing the broad balance of knowledge from medical sciences, social sciences and humanities in nursing curricula to improve nurses' understanding of patient, community, society and the world.
- Incorporating research education and training into nursing curricula to enable nurses to implement evidence-based practice for patient care.
- Increasing the curricula content of community healthcare and primary healthcare to provide the basis of developing community health nursing

05. Recommendation: Evidence-based practice

There is considerable delay in acquiring evidence-based practice in Sri Lanka due to a lack of basic education and impediments in the evidence-based practice process. This situation can be changed by:

- Introducing courses of evidence-based practice in basic, post-basic and university nursing programs to enable nurses' basic understanding of evidence-based practice process.
- Establishing a nursing research and ethics committee that replaces the current long and complex process of getting ethical approval through medical ethics committees.
- Increasing the dissemination of research findings in Sri Lanka through the establishment of local nursing journals, conferences and education programs.
- Establishing a nursing advisory committee at the Ministry of Health so that it integrates best practice evidence into education and clinical practice.
- Establishing a close link between the education and clinical sectors to enable conduct of joint research and evidence utilisation.

06. Recommendation: Resources allocation and funding

It is vital that students and nurses in different sectors (educators, clinicians, administrators and researchers) have better working conditions and encouragement for further education, training and research. This can be achieved by:

- Allocating adequate resources and funds for developing basic and essential facilities for patients and for nurses and healthcare workers.
- Increasing facilities (e.g. class rooms, libraries, teaching and learning materials, computers, internet etc.) in nursing education institutions.
- Allocating resources and funds for nursing research to enhance nursing research, education and patient care.
- Offering postgraduate scholarships for nurse educators, researchers and clinicians through local and international funding agencies (e.g. WHO) so that nurses' undertaking of further education and professional development is made possible.
- Offering incentives for nursing students (e.g. monthly pay for clinical work for all students whether in nursing schools or university) and for post RN students (e.g. subsidised fees, study leave) to ensure continual recruitment for nursing and career development.

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