Practical Wisdom in Nursing Practice: A Concept Analysis

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Background, Aim & Method

Wisdom & Practical Wisdom
Wisdom is an ancient and complex concept that has intrigued human kind since the dawn of time. Wisdom conjures and blends images of abstract and theoretical concepts that are simultaneously ethereal and inaccessible with an almost timeless and universal appeal. Wisdom can be defined as an esteemed ability to embody the optimum integration of knowledge, mind, virtue and action. In ancient times wisdom was regarded as the gift of divine beings, sages, gurus and elite scholars and was thought to be beyond the reach of ordinary people. Aristotle disagreed with this view and argued that wisdom was not the preserve of the few but was embedded in the seemingly ordinary and mundane decisions and choices that typify everyday experience. Aristotle referred to this as ‘Practical Wisdom’.

Aim & Method
The purpose of this concept analysis is to investigate the concept of practical wisdom and examine its implications for nursing practice. The Rodgers & Knafl (2000) evolutionary model of concept analysis was selected. The strength of the method is that it is systematic and provides a structured framework designed to identify the antecedents and attributes of practical wisdom in nursing practice.

Attributes of practical wisdom in nursing practice
Attributes are characteristics that provide a description of the concept. In this concept analysis three key attributes of practical wisdom in nursing have been identified. These are experiential knowing, judgement and balance, and action.

Experiential Knowing
Practical wisdom is an intellectual and professional artistry that recognises, adapts and responds to the complexities and challenges of everyday nursing practice. Practical wisdom is cultivated through experience and is a kind of experiential knowing that transforms, integrates and contextualises knowledge and skills derived from both theory and practice. These are transformed into a coherent and patient specific understanding of a given clinical encounter.

Judgement and Balance
The practically wise nurse needs to be able make decisions and judgements on how to act. In order to this effectively the nurse must be able to achieve a balance between the multiple, competing and often conflicting patient and organisational needs and demands. These judgements and balancing acts are not necessarily about musing over very complex cases but are more about making everyday decisions to optimise the care delivered to the patient amidst the complexity of competing demands. These kinds of judgements and balancing acts require practical wisdom.

Action
Practical wisdom is not merely about the development and acquisition of sophisticated experiential knowledge, judgement and balance. Practical wisdom is embodied in action and as such the practically wise nurse does not merely speculate about what to do but does it. Practical wisdom requires matching ‘will’ with ‘skill’, i.e. it’s not enough for the nurse to know what to do in an patient encounter: s/he has to be able to transfer this will into purposeful action.

Antecedents of practical wisdom in nursing practice
Antecedents capture the characteristics that precede a concept. The antecedents of practical wisdom in nursing practice are experience, reflection, and care, compassion and empathy.

Experience
Practical wisdom in nursing is impossible without substantial clinical experience. Experience is central to the acquisition of practical wisdom and incorporates the clinical environment and the nurse’s own inner reality. This inner reality is multi-layered and encompasses know-how, beliefs and values about practice, as well as professional and cultural identity.

Reflection
Practical wisdom cannot be achieved through experience alone. Reflection is essential to the cultivation of practical wisdom as it facilitates in the development of a deeper understanding of clinical practice. Practically wise nurses have well developed reflective skills that enable them to perceive the patient and clinical events from multiple perspectives. To be practically wise the nurse must be able to examine his/her practice with high levels of self-awareness and insight.

Care, Compassion and Empathy
Care, compassion and empathy play a key role in the development of practical wisdom. Practically wise nurses need compassion and empathy in order to implement caring practices that recognise the context specific motives and behaviours of patients and others. This in turn enables the nurse to interact with patients and others in a caring, constructive, empathetic and compassionate way.

Conclusion
The conceptual analysis has revealed that practical wisdom in nursing requires time and effort and involves a combination of experiential knowing, judgement and balance, and action. Experience, reflection, care, compassion and empathy have been identified as key enabling factors that foster the development of practical wisdom in everyday nursing practice.

Reference