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Nurses Lack Education in Caring for Patients with Down Syndrome
An Integrative Literature Review

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BACKGROUND
- Over the last 30 years, significant medical advancements have dramatically increased the life expectancy of people with Down Syndrome.
- Due to a steadily growing population of older adults with Down Syndrome, health care professionals, specifically nurses, are seeing more individuals with this condition in both inpatient and outpatient facilities than in years past.
- A training deficit has been discovered as an underlying problem when caring for individuals with intellectual disabilities in health care settings; 93.3% of undergraduate students, in the healthcare field, reported that they felt they needed more training when caring for individuals with intellectual disabilities.

RESULTS
Nursing Curriculum
- Nurses report that they have received little or no clinical support training in the area of developmental disabilities.
- Exposing nursing students to clinical placements involving individuals with disabilities in a community or family setting significantly improved their attitudes and opinions about working with this population.
- 61% of nurses indicated that their clinical exposure to individuals with disabilities during nursing school resulted in a willingness to work in the disability field.
- Interactive multimedia instruction, involving virtual patients, has significantly improved nursing student’s comfort level when caring for patients with Down Syndrome.

Preventative Health
- One way to improve nursing care of persons with Down Syndrome is to teach the importance of preventive health care for affected again people with this disorder.
- Example: Due to inherently weak eye muscles, and risk for cataracts and glaucoma, older persons with Down Syndrome should have annual eye examinations.

Equality and Equity
- When health care professionals, specifically nurses, were questioned concerning their delivery of care for people with intellectual disabilities many said that they do not discriminate but rather treat everyone the same.
- Treating people equally does not always mean treating them the same.
- If patients have different needs than providing the same intervention will inevitably result in some needs not being met.
- Example: Sending out a letter giving an appointment reminder for an out-patient clinic. However, what if the letter is received by someone who has a mild learning disability, lives alone, and cannot read? It is unlikely that they will attend the clinic, they may not followed up on (other than another letter), and their health needs will not be met.

METHODS
- Data bases searched include CINHAL and PubMed.
- Search terms: Down Syndrome, Education, Nursing; Down Syndrome AND Education AND Nursing.
- Theory of Stage Planning Program Model for Health Education/Health Promotion Activity by Dean Whitehead guided the literature review as a theoretical framework.

CONCLUSIONS
- Established the knowledge gap that exists in the field of nursing when caring for individuals with Down Syndrome.
- Verified the need for further nursing education in caring for patients with Down Syndrome which will thus improve their quality of life.
- Showed that nursing curriculum development can improve the competence of nurses caring for patients with Down Syndrome.

NURSING IMPLICATIONS
- Nurses must be aware that lower-functioning adults are unable to communicate intelligibly, describe pain precisely, follow instructions, or give legal medical consent in part due to the simplified cognitive skills and language underdevelopment commonly seen in patients with Down Syndrome.
- Nurses need to have a better understanding of aging adults with Down Syndrome to tailor care individually for better patient outcomes.