“Student nurses can also solve issues in an innovative way”

The need for innovative solutions to healthcare challenges is something that student nurses are taught to value in their training. As a student nurse myself, when completing a recent university assignment I was asked to consider a practice innovation or service improvement idea. However, rather than just considering it, I thought I would like to try actually implementing an idea. I believe that innovation from a student’s perspective is achievable and that we can have the power to influence practice and initiate service improvement.

Most innovations start with a simple idea. While on clinical placement, I observed how much trouble many patients had getting a good night’s sleep. Obviously there are factors, such as being woken up for observations and certain unavoidable noises in the clinical environment, that prevent good sleep. These things cannot always be changed but I know how important sleep is to patients and I believed I could try to improve sleep quality on a small scale in a way that would still be beneficial.

After speaking to many patients about their sleep experiences, I came up with the idea of creating a guideline suggesting ways in which nurses could help patients to sleep. I also got permission from the ward manager to trial the use of eye masks, which she agreed to let me pilot on the ward if I sourced them myself. Having no funding, I approached a number of suppliers asking if any could donate eye masks for my project – luckily one company agreed so I was able to trial my idea.

Overall, I received positive feedback from both staff and patients about my service improvement. Although I was not able to statistically evaluate the significance of the eye-mask use, I was able to see first-hand the difference they made – and it felt such an achievement. The eye masks particularly benefited patients who wanted to nap during the day but were prevented from doing so by the bright lights of the ward.

As a student nurse, it is an amazing feeling to see patients benefiting from something you have initiated and developed, especially when I didn’t think service improvement was something I would be able to influence.

I understand there are barriers to innovations in practice and that for ideas to be taken on long term, more input would be needed on funding, time and resource allocation. However, on a small scale, with nothing except an idea, dedication and the appropriate support, my idea was successful. It may only have been a small step towards improving sleep quality but, in its own way it did help – and that made all the time and effort worthwhile.

I believe student nurses can offer a fresh pair of eyes and perspective to clinical areas and notice things that may be otherwise overlooked. I want to prove that student nurses can innovate, and that even simple ideas can make a difference. So, if you have an idea – try it! It could turn out to be a small step towards a brilliant service improvement.

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Admission to hospital is rarely a picnic, but for people with dementia it can be traumatic. Not only are they in an unfamiliar place, with unfamiliar people – they may not understand why they are there. This can cause distress and lead them to display challenging behaviour that affects everyone on the ward and requires additional staff.

Our Innovation (page 21) reports how employing an activities coordinator can minimise distress in patients with dementia. The coordinator organises social activities and exercise classes, and spends one-to-one time with patients. Having someone who focuses on these patients reduced distress and challenging behaviour to such a degree that ward spending on agency staff dropped, as did patients’ average length of stay. Sometimes improving care brings unexpected financial benefits.

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