

Research Review: Suicide in older people, attitudes and knowledge of emergency nurses: A multi-centre study

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Citation

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Background

Suicide rates have increased worldwide and will continue to be a significant concern as the COVID19 pandemic unfolds. The authors of this study note that emergency nurses are ideally placed for a role in identifying those at higher risk for suicide.

Purpose of the study

The stated purpose of this study is to evaluate emergency nurses' knowledge of and attitudes towards suicide, particularly as it related to the older adult.

Research approach and methods

The authors chose to use a 28-item survey consisting of yes/no, Likert scale and free text responses to collect their data. The information was analyzed with using descriptive quantitative statistics along with conventional content analysis. The authors note that the reliability and validity of the survey was not formally verified.

Setting and sample

This study utilized a convenience sample of emergency nurses working in four emergency departments in Sydney, Australia. Participants were recruited using posters place in the departments and announcements at departmental meetings and then relying on the initiative of the individual nurse to contact the researcher. Individuals included for participation in the survey included regular emergency department nurses, nurse managers and nurse educators for those departments. Excluded were non-nurse providers or relief nurses not normally scheduled in the ER.

Findings

The authors had a response rate of 136 nurses. The experience for the participants is reported as a mean of 7.2 years of ER experience and 11.7 years of nursing experience in general. The majority of respondents were ER floor nurses. Researchers reported that while the nurses identified suicide as a common event in Australia, their knowledge of suicide rates in older people was less sure. The respondents frequently identified previous self-harm, depression and hopelessness as well as male gender as being risk factors for suicide in elderly patients.

Six themes emerged in the free text section of the survey with respect to how the needs of the elderly differed from those of younger people presenting to the ER. These included co-morbidities and chronic illness, social isolation, poor function or loss of independence, cognitive impairment and financial

concerns. These were contextualized as opportunities to provide support that might minimize suicide risk for older patients.

Commentary

One of the greatest strengths of this study is that the research is timely considering the current global COVID-19 pandemic response which has led to increased social isolation, unemployment, and economic recession. Any one of these factors can lead to an increase in suicide rates (McIntyre & Lee, 2020). One of the populations most impacted by the need for social isolation are the elderly. The significant morbidity and mortality for the geriatric population associated with contracting COVID19 has resulted in often more stringent isolation measures to slow the spread of the disease. This has resulted in exacerbation of loneliness and depression experienced by the elderly (Roy et al, 2020; di Giacomo et al, 2020). Another strength would be the strong response from the RN population (vs. management or educators) as this demographic would be the first line for assessing and intervening with high suicide risk older people presenting to the ER.

This paper would be stronger with further detail around the respondents. The convenience sample passively recruited is appropriate as a non-random sample, but it may not be representative of the population without knowing the characteristics of the overall RN population for these combined urban emergency departments. Those who took the initiative to participate may be more confident (or less) in their knowledge and attitudes towards suicide than their peers thus skewing the results. The overall response rate was lower than recommended for survey research at 58% of potential respondents. Kelley et al. (2003) identify that a good response rate for survey research is between 65% and 75% depending on how the survey is administered.

Overall, this is an important topic for exploration and the authors should be commended to their foray into subject. It is imperative that ER nurses recognize both the breadth of their knowledge base and biases within it to provide comprehensive care across the life span.

Key messages

- Older people can be at high risk for suicide, but that risk can go un or under-recognized.
- ER nurses are well positioned to assess and intervene with patients who are at high risk for suicide across the life span.
- Education on suicide prevention and risk recognition across the life-span is imperative.

References

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