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Gary Rolfe

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>> Version of Record - Feb 2, 2006

What is This?

In command of care: clinical leadership explored

Gary Rolfe PhD, MA, BSc, RMN, RGN, NT, PGCEA
Professor of Nursing
University of Wales, Swansea

This is an interesting, relevant and very timely account of an empirical study into clinical leadership. Although it claims to use a grounded theory (GT) approach, it appears only loosely to follow the tenets of that methodology, and might have benefited from adhering more rigidly to some of the basic principles of GT, particularly, as we shall see, the idea of theoretical sampling. Bearing in mind the ongoing debate about the use of previously published literature in GT, we might also query the extensive theoretical work and major literature review undertaken as preparation for this study, particularly since little of this work appears to feature in the discussion of the findings.

In keeping with the GT approach, the study is designed in three stages, each building on the findings of the previous one. As such, the third and final stage of eight interviews with clinical nurse leaders identified by their peers is the culmination and most important and interesting aspect of the study, and is rightly given the most prominent position in this paper. Indeed, as the author rightly points out, the first phase in particular is problematic in a number of ways, not least of which is the disappointingly low response rate of 23%. In addition, the questionnaire does not appear to have been tested for validity or reliability, and questions particularly need to be asked (although the author does not do so) about its construct and content validity. Nevertheless, it plays a useful role in selecting participants for stage two of the study, which focuses on perceptions of leadership in general, and clinical leadership in particular. Of particular significance here is the distinction made by most respondents between clinical leaders and ward managers, and (although I suspect that most of us already know this) of the conflict between the two roles within the individual. This is an issue which was developed in greater depth in stage three.

In keeping with GT methodology, stage three is the main focus of the study, and consisted of interviews with the eight nurses most often identified by their peers in stage two as clinical leaders. It was perhaps a little surprising that the author should have opted to select respondents purely according to how many of their peers nominated them, since this method of sample selection excluded some potentially interesting respondents, such as a D-grade staff nurse and a nursing assistant. Perhaps the grounded theory method of theoretical sampling would have been more appropriate in this instance.

This stage of the research identified some important and significant issues which begged for further discussion and development, but for which space presumably did

not allow. For example, a strong theme emerging from the findings was the notion that several of these identified leaders were genuinely surprised, and most had not been educationally prepared for such a role. It appears that it is personal and inter-personal qualities that are valued in clinical leaders, along with a strong commitment to hands-on nursing, which raises several issues, such as whether formal leadership training is either necessary or sufficient to produce good clinical leaders. Another theme which might have benefited from further discussion is the role-division between leadership and management. For the G-grade respondents, this issue was felt internally as they struggled to meet the demands of both aspects of their jobs. For the F-grade respondents, the internal schism was not so much of an issue. However, it would have been very interesting to have seen some exploration of the potential external role conflict that might have existed between the G-grade ward manager and the F-grade nurse identified by her peers as the clinical leader. This issue also raises other questions, such as the need for such a highly paid, highly experienced ward managers, who by their own admission are tied up in the office doing paperwork.

Finally, it is worth noting the significance of what was *not* raised by this study. There was no mention in the report of the currently re-emerging issue of advanced practice, nor of the nurse consultant role, no identification of research skills as important for the clinical nurse leader, and no mention of evidence-based practice. As I said at the outset, this is an important and informative study which, despite some methodological difficulties, deserves to be read widely, but which left me wanting more.