

Culturally Competent Nursing Approach and Health Literacy in Elderly Care

Abstract

Multicultural population structures are formed with population mobility throughout the world. The need for health services increases with the aging of immigrants in the place where they migrated. In this case, health professionals should take into account the differences and cultural characteristics of elderly individuals from different cultures in their health levels. Transcultural nursing means providing effective care by meeting the cultural needs of individuals, families, and groups, improving the cultural knowledge of nurses, humanistic approach, preserving the health of the individual, and using all improvement methods in care. Nurses should know what the aging period means, cultural practices, and reasons for applying/not applying to health care to provide holistic care for elderly. The provision of transcultural nursing care requires reading, writing, and understanding health-related information. With the increase in the elderly population, those with low health literacy levels and cultural diversity are likely to increase. In multicultural societies, nurses provide care by analyzing the cultural characteristics of the elderly and are aware of the importance of health literacy that can contribute to improved health outcomes. The care that nurses give, taking into account the health literacy levels of older individuals, can also contribute to culturally adequate nursing care. The purpose of this review is to examine culturally adequate nursing approach and health literacy in elderly care.

Keywords: *Elderly, cultural competence, health literacy, nursing*

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Introduction

All over the world, there is a geographical change due to the effects of globalization (political, economic, and social) and negativities such as migration, natural disasters, wars, minority groups, environmental, and economic crises. In this case, multicultural population structures formed by individuals, families, and groups from different cultures are formed in the world.¹ There is an increase in the elderly population day by day and the migration of elderly individuals due to economic change.² Migration rates of the population aged 65 and over are increasing in Oceania, North America, and Europe (19.2%, 16.3%, and 14.3%, respectively).³ In Turkey, 6.2% of the elderly population emigrate.⁴

The health care of elderly people from different cultures also differs. In this case, it is necessary for health professionals and institutions providing health care services to take into account the differences in health levels and cultural characteristics of these individuals. Nurses who use the knowledge of the culture of a group in a multicultural society and respect their knowledge of health are considered culturally competent.⁵

Providing culturally competent nursing care requires reading, writing, and understanding health-related information. This situation brings health literacy to the agenda and reveals the interaction between access to health services, health care providers, and the individual, which are important components of health literacy.⁶ Learning and evaluating the cultures and value systems of older people help improve health and disease management and reduce ill-health outcomes.⁷ This assessment should include the health literacy of older people living in multicultural societies and their ability to access, process, and understand health services and to make appropriate health decisions based on their cultural beliefs.⁵

With the advancing age, the level of health literacy decreases, and this situation is more prominent in elderly individuals. The health literacy level of 3 out of every 4 elderly

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people in Turkey is not at a sufficient level.⁸ Elderly individuals with low health literacy levels face many challenges in health care services. The elderly often have difficulties in filling out health forms, understanding health information, keeping up with appointments and periodic checkups, and managing medication.⁵ Elderly individuals with low health literacy are more likely to endanger their health due to their inability to obtain, understand, and analyze basic health information.^{9,10}

The definition of health literacy has progressed from reading health-related information to the ability to solve problems, calculate, express, and make appropriate health decisions.¹⁰ These abilities are often associated with cultural and societal factors.⁵ Not evaluating the health literacy levels of elderly individuals and not taking cultural factors into account can create barriers between individuals and nurses and may lead to a decrease in positive health outcomes.¹¹

With the increase in the elderly population, those with low health literacy levels and cultural diversity are likely to increase. With the increase in cultural diversity, health professionals need to focus on providing health services in accordance with the culture and especially on health literacy.^{2,11} However, there is limited information in the literature examining the concepts of health literacy and culturally competent nursing approach. This review aimed to examine in detail the culturally competent nursing approach and health literacy in elderly care.

Elderly Health and Care

The rate of the elderly population has been increasing in the world, especially in Turkey. According to the data of the Turkish Statistical Institute, the rate of the elderly population in the total population was 9.5% in 2020. Of this population, 44.2% were men and 55.8% were women. When analyzed according to age groups, it was seen that 63.8% of the elderly were 65-74 aged, 27.9% were 75-84 aged, and 8.4% are 85 and over aged. According to population projections, it has been estimated that the rate of the elderly population will be 11.0% in 2025, 16.3% in 2040, 22.6% in 2060, and 25.6% in 2080.¹²

It is necessary to meet the expectations of the elderly with a holistic perspective in the protection and development of the health of the elderly and the provision of health services. It is important to meet the basic needs of the elderly person such as nutrition, sleep and rest, activity and exercise, ensuring safety and sexuality, and ensuring that they benefit from health care.¹³ In old age, physical problems such as balance disorder, falling, change in mobility, decrease in muscle strength; chronic health problems such as heart disease, stroke, cancer, and diabetes; cognitive problems such as dementia, Alzheimer's disease; mental problems such as depression, anxiety; economic problems such as job and income loss, inability to adapt to declining income; social problems such as loneliness, family, relatives, and friends, changes in marital status (widowhood, divorce, and marriage) are seen.¹⁴⁻¹⁶ In order for the elderly to maintain and improve their health, it is necessary to eliminate or reduce the negative factors in the physical, biological, social, and economic environment. In addition, ensuring that elderly individuals maintain their relations with the society, organizing activities to share their knowledge and skills with the younger generation, ensuring that they acquire hobbies in line with their own interests and abilities, planning social activities such as artistic activities, picnics, trips, theater,

keeping their social life constantly alive with their peers and family improve health and well-being of them.¹⁷

Despite aging, individuals making decisions about their own lives and being respected and a valuable person in their family and social environment affect the health of the elderly positively.¹⁸ It is also important that the elderly are respected by younger age groups, not discriminated against, abused, and neglected.¹⁹ Determining the hobbies they want to do throughout their lives, creating environments where they can realize themselves, exhibiting their existing talents and skills, producing something for the society, taking part in educational and cultural activities improve their physical, mental, and social health in order to enable elderly individuals to realize themselves.²⁰

Elderly care means meeting the needs and requirements of individuals specific to the individual. Elderly care includes daycare, assisted care, long-term care, terminal care, nursing home care, or home care.²¹ It is important to be supported by family, friends, and society while caring for elderly individuals. In elderly care, it is necessary to ensure that the elderly can live on their own and have access to health and social services when necessary.²² When providing care to the elderly, it is important to respect their needs and requirements and their culture, lifestyle, and beliefs.²³

In the care of the elderly, nurses should evaluate the individual as a whole and consider factors related to their culture, values, beliefs, customs, and traditions.²⁴ In order to provide holistic care to the elderly, nurses should know what the old age period means in the society they serve, the cultural practices in this period, and the barriers to applying health services and using this service effectively.²⁵ Contrary to this situation, the inability to understand/perceive the culture of the elderly may lead to problems such as communication problems with the elderly, lack of effective health care, racism, discrimination, stereotypes, and inequalities in health.²⁶

Culturally Competent Nursing

The culturally competent nursing approach is defined as a field of nursing that examines different cultures comparatively, focuses on scientific knowledge with a humanistic approach, adopts perceptions, behaviors, practices, values, and beliefs in all cultures, and offers methods of protecting health and improving diseases.^{27,28} The aim of this care is to meet the cultural needs of individuals, families, and groups with a humanistic approach to provide effective and quality nursing care in line with cultural needs, to develop culturally scientific knowledge, to respect the behaviors, practices, values, and beliefs in all cultures, to protect the health of the individual, and to use all improvement methods in care.²⁹ Elderly people in different cultures have various cultural practices to protect and improve health. For example, applying herbal treatments (olive, fennel, verbena tea, pepper, ginger, etc.) to protect the health, not consuming certain foods/drinks (alcohol, pork, etc.), praying, providing hygiene before prayer, walking for mental health, visiting friends, sleeping and resting habits, doing leisure activities such as visiting historical/archaeological sites, not donating/not giving blood, avoiding surgery, ayurveda, and practicing glass cups can be counted.^{24,30} Nurses should encourage elderly individuals to explain the different cultural practices they apply, include these practices in health care, respect their preferences, learn about their religious beliefs, create the necessary environment for them to fulfill these beliefs, and ensure their participation in health decisions. Nurses who know different cultural

practices could provide care in line with the needs of the elderly and plan and apply the right interventions.²⁴ Nurses who provide culturally competent care play an important role in improving the quality of health care.¹⁴

Culturally competent care is given if the elderly individuals access healthcare services, develop a relationship of trust and respect between the individual and the nurse, include nurses' cultural diversity experiences, awareness, and sensitivities in healthcare, be unbiased, and value healthcare practices of the elderly.^{1,5,11} In order to provide culturally competent nursing care, it is necessary to evaluate individuals' health-disease perceptions, sociocultural norms, previous health services, and language barriers. Learning these and including them in nursing care strengthen the patient/healthy individual-nurse relationship, build trust, and reduce misunderstandings. It also helps nurses avoid potentially dangerous behaviors and increase cultural competence.^{5,31}

Health Literacy

Health literacy is a concept that increases a healthy and quality life, enables health professionals to acquire communication skills and clinical care skills within the individuals and teams they serve, and to be included in the decision mechanism about their own health for individuals who receive health services.^{10,31} In studies examining health literacy in elderly individuals, it is stated that increasing age, place of residence for a long time, education and income level, ethnicity, gender, and access to health services are variables that affect health literacy, and with the increase in health literacy, physical and cognitive health will improve, participation in health decisions, communication, compliance with treatment will increase, and successful aging will be ensured.³²⁻³⁴

When the level of health literacy is analyzed according to the European Union member countries, the countries with a high level of insufficient health literacy are Bulgaria, Spain, Austria, Germany, Poland, and Greece, and almost half of the European member countries are at the level of insufficient and problematic health literacy.³⁵ In the validity and reliability study of health literacy scales conducted in Turkey, 52.7% of the participants were at the level of insufficient and problematic health literacy according to the European Health Literacy Scale 47. In this study, the health literacy level of 78.9% of individuals aged 65 and over is not sufficient.⁸

The level of health literacy decreases with increasing age. With the advancing age, elderly individuals with low health literacy levels should be given training on subjects such as being healthy, gaining healthy lifestyle behaviors, and ensuring the use of preventive health services.³⁶ Establishing communication with elderly individuals with low health literacy levels, educating these individuals, and ensuring the development of nurses' knowledge and skills while providing health care services can contribute to both increasing the professional satisfaction of nurses and providing better health care to the elderly.³⁷

It may be possible for elderly individuals to apply to health professionals in health control or disease management and to understand and apply what they say, with health literacy. The important point for the health literacy of the elderly is that the individual stays healthy, understands and interprets the basic health information necessary to protect and develop health, acquires a behavior appropriate to

this situation, better understands health professionals, actively participates in health decisions, and makes right decisions for their own health.^{10,22} By increasing the health literacy level of the elderly, better quality health service delivery can be achieved, health level can be improved, and hospital readmissions, health expenditures, morbidity, and mortality rates can be reduced.³⁸

The Role of Culturally Competent Nursing and Health Literacy in Elderly Care

Two of the most important concepts for promoting health and eliminating inequalities in health are giving cultural care to the individual and increasing health literacy.^{39,40} Culturally competent nursing approach and health literacy are concepts directly related to health care.⁵ Individuals' cultures, beliefs, and practices are part of holistic nursing care. A culturally competent nursing approach requires reading, writing, and understanding health-related information.⁶ This situation brings health literacy to the agenda.

The literacy level of the elderly should be determined by the health literacy scales, taking into account the cultural and social dimensions. In order to increase health literacy, elderly individuals should be directed to reliable information sources, and health information appropriate for their level should be presented to them in the best way.³⁸ For example, public health announcements and health education materials are culturally appropriate and understandable, improving the skills of reaching people and organizations providing health care services, and being able to understand consent forms.⁴¹ It is critical to evaluate health literacy and respect cultural norms when providing nursing care for individuals with low health literacy levels in multicultural societies.^{5,31}

The health perception of elderly individuals is shaped by personal beliefs and cultural values, and this affects health literacy. For example, culture affects how individuals define health, how they think about symptoms/health problems or treatment, and how, when, and where they will access health care, and it also affects the health literacy of individual.^{5,27,31} For this reason, if the cultural norms do not match the values of the health system, even if the individual has sufficient reading, writing, and arithmetic skills, she/he may have problems in accessing health services, communicating with service providers, and maintaining effective self-management.³¹ For this, by providing culturally adequate care, it could contribute to the health literacy of the elderly.

Nurses who care for elderly individuals from different cultures have to be ready for cultural care. For this, they should develop their transcultural communication skills, have knowledge about the cultures of the elderly, learn the beliefs and practices specific to their cultures, and include them in care.^{24,31,42} Nurses should plan care using resources (training programs for cultural competence, diagnostic guides for cultural characteristics, etc.) aimed at increasing the health literacy of the elderly and developing their own cultural competences.^{29,43} Providing care in this way does not eliminate inequalities in health but helps to reduce them.⁵ In addition, sharing responsibilities between nurses and the elderly, understanding between nurses and the elderly, and maintaining this communication by establishing an effective communication are possible with a culturally competent nursing approach and health literacy.³⁸

Health information and communication skills of elderly individuals and nurses, the quality of health service delivery, the functioning of the health system, the cultural structure of the society are related to health literacy.³⁷ People gain health literacy skills in the social and cultural environments of the society they live in.⁴⁶ While cultural and social factors affect health literacy, the increase in cultural differences and the low level of health literacy can make it difficult to convey health-related information, understand health messages, and communicate.⁴⁴ Nurses have to consider the cultural health beliefs and practices of the elderly, their preferred languages, and their level of health literacy. Providing care to elderly individuals in their native language and in accordance with their cultural values increases the health knowledge of individuals, makes it easier to understand health messages, and changes health behaviors in a positive way.⁴⁵

Providing health care with culturally appropriate health materials increases the health knowledge and health literacy of the elderly.^{31,42} In Fitzpatrick et al's study,⁴⁶ elderly people from different Asian groups (China, Korea, and Vietnam) were asked to take photographs to show the factors that positively or negatively affect their heart health. Group discussion sessions were held on photographs expressing heart health in line with their own perceptions. In these sessions, the photographs revealed the specific cultural beliefs of the individuals. It has been stated that the use of visual images such as photographs is effective in determining the perceptions of the elderly about heart health and increases the knowledge about heart health. In another study, web-based health education was given to elderly people living in rural areas to increase their health literacy, and the health literacy level of the elderly people who like to use the internet increased.⁴⁷ The providing of education by taking into account the culture of the individual, the preparation of educational materials specific to cultures, the providing of effective communication, and the implementation of interventions aimed at increasing health literacy affect the health of the individual positively.^{31,42}

Conclusion

The increase in the elderly population and the rate of formation of multicultural societies are increasing day by day. In this case, the level of health literacy decreases, and the need for culturally competent care increases. It is important to evaluate the health literacy and ability of older people in multicultural societies to access, process, and understand health services and their cultural beliefs. Providing care to elderly individuals in accordance with their cultural values and health literacy levels increases individuals' health knowledge, makes it easier to understand health messages, and changes health behaviors in a positive way. Nurses caring for the elderly can provide care by analyzing cultural characteristics, establishing effective communication with the elderly, and aiming to increase the health literacy of the elderly, which can increase positive health outcomes. The care given by nurses by taking into account the health literacy levels of elderly individuals can also contribute to culturally competent nursing care for elderly health.

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