Reviewer's report

Title: What establishes an excellent nurse? A focus group and Delphi Panel approach

Version: 0 Date: 28 Dec 2016

Reviewer: Kathryn Pfaff

Reviewer's report:

Thank you for the opportunity to review this manuscript. As an educator, I agree that excellence in nursing should be a guiding pursuit in nursing education.

Overall Comments and Questions:

Why did you choose the focus group and Delphi process as the framework for analysis vs. a concept analysis?

I would like to see greater theoretical rationale for why excellence is a benchmark for nursing practice and education. Is there any research that links it specifically (versus other related concepts) to outcomes such as patient-centred care, quality and safety? More evidence is needed to support the need for this particular study.

As a North American educator, I would like further background on honors programs in the Netherlands. In Canada, entry-to-practice requires a baccalaureate degree in nursing, which is at an honors level. How would the findings of your study specifically inform honors versus non-honors programs. Are the findings applicable to both?

One might argue that excellence is best perceived the recipients of care. Please emphasize that the findings reflect the perceptions of nurses only. Given that contemporary health care is focusing on patient and family centred care, excellence in nursing should also be defined from the patient and family perspective.

I believe that your conclusion of "communicative" and "cooperative" as "normal nursing skills" is accurate. What I find unclear is how these attributes define "excellence". Both seem passive attributes and one could argue that these are minimal and expected competencies of nurses, as well as other health care providers, and perhaps even patients. I am wondering if the data provide some qualifying terms that could be used elevate the attributes to a level that implies excellence that is specific to nursing.
Comments about Methods:

1. Why were only nurses working in hospitals and mental health institutions recruited? This limits the transferability of the findings.

2. The description of the experts recruited for the Delphi process is unclear and contradictory in some instances. In particular, lines 52-54 are vague. Please re-write this section to clarify and make more explicit and concise.

3. Although I understand your approach to data analysis, a flow diagram that demonstrates how a selected sample of data were reduced would lend rigor to your manuscript. This is just a suggestion for consideration.

4. The findings section lack sufficient data to support each attribute. This section requires considerable development to demonstrate congruence between the attribute and the data. You might also consider a table that clearly presents the attributes with sufficient exemplar data.

Comments about Writing Quality:

1. There are a number of grammar and spelling errors throughout the manuscript that require correction.

2. In the abstract, there is a lack in consistency in use of capital letters when reporting the attributes.

3. One of the attributes is reported as a verb (coordinate) where the remainder are adjectives. Consider consistency.
Are the methods appropriate and well described?
If not, please specify what is required in your comments to the authors.

No

Does the work include the necessary controls?
If not, please specify which controls are required in your comments to the authors.

Unable to assess

Are the conclusions drawn adequately supported by the data shown?
If not, please explain in your comments to the authors.

Unable to assess

Are you able to assess any statistics in the manuscript or would you recommend an additional statistical review?
If an additional statistical review is recommended, please specify what aspects require further assessment in your comments to the editors.

Not relevant to this manuscript

Quality of written English
Please indicate the quality of language in the manuscript:

Needs some language corrections before being published

Declaration of competing interests
Please complete a declaration of competing interests, considering the following questions:

1. Have you in the past five years received reimbursements, fees, funding, or salary from an organisation that may in any way gain or lose financially from the publication of this manuscript, either now or in the future?

2. Do you hold any stocks or shares in an organisation that may in any way gain or lose financially from the publication of this manuscript, either now or in the future?

3. Do you hold or are you currently applying for any patents relating to the content of the manuscript?

4. Have you received reimbursements, fees, funding, or salary from an organization that holds or has applied for patents relating to the content of the manuscript?

5. Do you have any other financial competing interests?

6. Do you have any non-financial competing interests in relation to this paper?
If you can answer no to all of the above, write 'I declare that I have no competing interests' below. If your reply is yes to any, please give details below.

I declare that I have no competing interests.

I agree to the open peer review policy of the journal. I understand that my name will be included on my report to the authors and, if the manuscript is accepted for publication, my named report including any attachments I upload will be posted on the website along with the authors' responses. I agree for my report to be made available under an Open Access Creative Commons CC-BY license (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/). I understand that any comments which I do not wish to be included in my named report can be included as confidential comments to the editors, which will not be published.

I agree to the open peer review policy of the journal