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Assessing the Cultural Competence of Healthcare Professionals in a Psychiatric Setting

Jean Kulas

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Hospitals, nursing homes, and mental health facilities throughout Rhode Island admit patients from a multitude of cultures on a daily basis. As a result, healthcare professionals are often taking care of patients from backgrounds other than their own. Different groups of people have their own set of norms and unique views regarding medical treatment. How knowledgeable are healthcare workers about certain cultural practices, beliefs, and symptomatology?

My goal was to assess the cultural competency of healthcare professionals in a psychiatric and mental health facility in Rhode Island. I chose to focus on the mental health setting instead of a general medical setting. I was interested with the interaction between nurses and other healthcare professionals with psychiatric patients from cultures different than their own. Were the healthcare workers aware of certain types of culture-bound syndromes? Did the nurses feel confident in their ability to distinguish between a cultural-bound syndrome and a psychotic episode?

After constructing an informal twenty-question survey, I distributed it to several healthcare professionals at the anonymous psychiatric facility. Participants included registered nurses, licensed practical nurses, mental health workers, and other professional employees. The participants ranged in job experience. Some professionals were relatively new to the psychiatric setting and others had been employed in mental health for over fifteen years.

This informal survey served as a tool to assess the degree of cultural competency in this mental health facility. Healthcare professionals who are culturally *incompetent* can misinterpret a patient's symptoms, which can lead to a misdiagnosis and an ineffective treatment plan. The final intention of my survey was to help the facility begin an intervention to further educate the employees. My goal was to be able to discuss the results of the survey with the facility's education department in hopes of beginning a cultural educational intervention for the healthcare professionals.