Emotional Intelligence, Soft Skills and Nursing Performance: A Study of Nursing in Medical and Surgical Wards of a Private Tertiary Care Hospital in Sri Lanka

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Background

The purpose of this study is to ascertain factors other than pure cognitive and technical competencies that would contribute to effective performance of a nurse working in a medical and surgical ward of a tertiary care hospital. Although it was known that other than hard or technical skills, soft skills too are important to enhance performance in any sphere of work, there had not been sufficient empirical evidence and academic literature to support this belief. Emotional Intelligence (EI), which has a close resemblance to soft skills although there is no academically accepted definition to soft skills, has become an important focus for researchers since Gardner's (1983) ground breaking research publication on multiple intelligence theory. The health care industry is one field where emotional interactions among human beings are often typified as an important part of the various roles.

Research Problem

Private healthcare sector in Sri Lanka plays an important role in caring for sick (APHNH, 2010) and nurse plays a key role in any hospital clinical operation (Tzeng & Ketefian, 2003; Zhang et al., 2001). Whilst technical skills play an important role in the nursing process, the importance of the soft skills had been felt severally in the recent past both in the public and private sectors. However, there is a lacuna in the knowledge as to what are the real soft skills that enrich the nursing process and underling theories. Contribution of EI towards enhancing nursing performance had not been empirically tested and relevance of soft skills in general to enhance nursing performance had not been discussed, although relationship between few individual soft skills and nursing performance had been recorded (Landa & Lopez-Zafra, 2010; McQueen, 2004). Moreover, it is important to identify the duties and tasks performed by nurses in a private sector as pointed out by Jayasekara (2009), where absence of a nursing regulation to register private sector nurses is a major drawback. According to him it is imperative that all nurses providing patient interventions should be registered with a reputable authority and obtains a licensure for practice the profession as done is all developed centuries.

Research Questions

This research fundamentally addresses three research questions. Firstly, what are the soft skills that are important to medical and surgical ward nurses to meet present and immediate future demands of its main stake holders? Secondary, to identify the relationship between EI and identified soft skills (since soft skills have no rigorous theory but EI has) and finally to ascertain the affect of EI and soft skills on nursing performance.

Methodology

Theoretical framework of this study is based on use of established theories on emotional intelligence and intellectual skills to understand soft skills in academically acceptable manner. It is significant that the study used academically widely used tool, Wong and Law Emotional Intelligence Scale (WLEIS) which

is a rare EI scale evolved in Asian context to measure emotional intelligence (Wong & Law, 2002) and another academically proven Asian theory in explaining intellectual skills (Koike & Inoki, 1990) which also describe contextual skills that are similar to soft skills. Soft skill levels of nurses were measured through a validated and reliability tested questionnaire administered to nurses. Both WLEIS and soft skills questionnaires administered by a research assistant.

Research is cross-sectional using survey design. Both qualitative and quantitative approaches were selected in the study depending on the best method to address research questions. In addressing the first research question of identifying soft skills relevant to nursing, Developing A Curriculum (DACUM, 1995), a qualitative approach was used and in addressing other research issues, a quantitative approach using regression and correlation analysis was used to analyse data gathered through the questionnaire administered to nurses. Qualitative evidence gathered through semi-structured interviews were used as evidence to prove the findings of the quantitative analysis. Three hospital administrators, 10 sisters, 15 nurses and 15 patients were interviewed. The quantitative study involved all 83 nurses serving in the medical and surgical wards of the case hospital.

Key Findings

There are 42 soft skills that are essentially required by the nurses to effectively discharge 9 nursing duties and 98 tasks identified in the study. Identification of green skills as a soft skill that is essential in discharging nursing function is a unique finding in this research.

The most startling revelation is that soft skills and emotional intelligence are strongly correlated, indicating the fact that a person high in emotional intelligence is also likely to have a high level of soft skills. This research also identifies that although emotional intelligence and soft skills are highly correlated they are not the same. Soft skills are a different set of competencies.

Another ground breaking finding of this research is that both soft skills and EI taken in isolation have a positive moderate and strong correlations respectively with nursing performance. When soft skills and EI are taken together having left out multi-colinearity effect, they have a positive correlation with nursing performance.

Among the components within EI, others' emotional appraisal (OEA) had no significant correlation with the balance three components namely self emotional appraisal (SEA), regulation of emotions (ROE) and use of emotions (UOE) although these three are highly correlated to each other.

Implications for the policy makers and management emanation from above findings could be immense especially in the context that soft skills and emotional intelligence enhance performance of nurses which was empirically proved in this research.

Conclusion

The identification of all duties and tasks of a medical and surgical ward nurse and the identification of 42 soft skills which are required by nurses to perform these tasks via a rigorous theoretically sound process is unique and policy makers could think of using this information to set nursing competency standards through further research. Identification of green skills as a soft skill that is essential to perform nursing duties should be further explored in the context that Goleman (2009) had described green skills as an intelligence.

Establishment that soft skills although strongly correlated with EI, are a separate and a distinct set of competencies and that soft skills and EI together can explain nursing performance adds new knowledge to the literature and future research could ascertain if soft skills are altogether a different set of intelligence.

The results show that the development of soft skills and emotional intelligence would facilitate the efficiency in performance and also high level of harmonious human interactions in the work place. Since both these soft skills and EI are not innate abilities and could be developed, employers can ensure higher level of productivity in organizations through development of soft skills and emotional intelligence of their employees.

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