Factors Influencing Critical Care Nurses to Speak Up

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ABSTRACT

Background: Nurses intervene in critical care units where risk due to severity of illness and complexity of treatment is high. Nurses still report a culture of silence and barriers to speaking up when patients are at risk for harm. Attitudes and beliefs that influence speaking up behaviors among critical care nurses have not been well documented. The Theory of Planned Behavior has been used to predict behaviors of health care professionals, but not speaking up among nurses.

Purpose: Utilizing the Theory of Planned Behavior, determine the barriers/facilitators to nurses speaking up. Develop a reliable, valid psychometric scale that could be used to assess intention to speak up when patients are at risk for harm.

Methods: A mixed-methods, exploratory, sequential design was utilized to assess beliefs and attitudes about speaking up and determine common factors and themes. A two-step Delphi internet survey of 44 critical care nurses was initially conducted. Results were incorporated into a second national survey of 308 critical care nurses. Principal component factor analysis determined the most common factors and Cronbach’s alpha determined reliability.

Results: Factor analysis revealed total variance explained – 68.79%, Cronbach’s alpha for the scale – 0.859, and values for the four sub-factors (contextual support; nursing professionalism; good intentions; and doing the right thing) ranged between 0.750 and 0.916.

Conclusions: Improvement in skilled communication among nurses begins with assessment of the problem. Findings revealed that nurses value professionalism, intend to keep the patient safe, and want to do the right thing, but contextual barriers could prevent nurses from speaking up. The final 29-item questionnaire to assess speaking up intention could be used in future research to verify reliability and validity of this instrument. Subsequently, the instrument could be used to identify nurses’ speaking up deficiencies and target areas for education.

Keywords: critical care, nurses speak up, scale development, theory of planned behavior