

Happenings

Using Interactive Health Communication Technology in a Renewed Approach to Nursing

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The use of information and communication technology (ICT) as an interactive means of transmitting information is on the increase. It appears to be the key to meeting the challenges of accessibility and continuity of care and services faced by our health-care system. ICT provides unprecedented access and exchange of the kinds of information that can ultimately transform many facets of nursing. It already supports professional practice by allowing ready access to information that is on the cutting edge of health-care knowledge — knowledge that has become indispensable for informed decision-making. Nurses can now benefit from remote continuing education, access to databases from their work stations, and interactive communication with peers through Internet discussion groups, as evidenced in virtual practice communities.

Telehealth is another field of application for ICT. We are now seeing the deployment of a multitude of innovative approaches that take advantage of technological solutions in order to provide enhanced patient follow-up. Nurses are being called upon to participate in the development of services better adapted to the needs of the population. Of particular note are telemonitoring, which allows for remote observation of patients' physiological parameters and readjustment of their therapeutic regimen as needed, and triage, which permits evaluation of a client's health status and the formulation of recommendations relative to treatment and follow-up. Additional ICT initiatives now being elaborated will make areas such as continuity, caregiving, and updating of electronic health files more efficient and effective. These new monitoring and triage approaches are changing the ways in which nurses' organize their work, making services available to a greater number of individuals.

Several innovative ICT nursing projects have been initiated in Quebec over the past 5 years. Two nurse researchers from the Groupe de recherche interuniversitaire en sciences infirmières de Montréal, whose

focus is the development and evaluation of nursing interventions, are working on the development of new ICT-assisted care approaches. Dr. Carmen Loiselle's research team from the McGill University School of Nursing is evaluating the role of ICT in the health, well-being, and health-care utilization of a diverse oncology clientele. Dr. Loiselle is also part of a team assessing the intrinsic qualities of ICT messages that optimize breast cancer screening behaviours. In addition, ICT plays a pivotal role in the academic exchanges between four universities involved in the Psychosocial Oncology Research Training program led by Dr. Loiselle and three nurse collaborators: Drs. Joan Bottorff (University of British Columbia), Lesley Degner (University of Manitoba), and Lorna Butler (Dalhousie University) (www.port.mcgill.ca).

Dr. José Côté, Research Chair for New Nursing Practice in the Université of Montréal nursing faculty, in partnership with the Département d'informatique et de recherche opérationnelle at the same institution, has developed a Web application that offers people with HIV/AIDS a virtual nursing intervention. It provides clients with the resources and support they need, when they need them and in real time, in the daily management of their therapies. This experimental approach is intended to offer this clientele high-quality individualized clinical follow-up in the context of service reorganization. Similar applications could be developed and evaluated for other clienteles managing complex health conditions.

ICT is proving to be an attractive and promising medium in nursing, for it enables access to support and information adapted to individual needs at the appropriate time, from the preferred location, at the desired frequency. While this type of intervention can never replace direct client-nurse interaction, it has its place in an array of approaches from which participants can choose according to their needs and preferences.

Interactive health communication technology is a means to an end rather than an end in itself, providing valuable support to members of the nursing community — researchers, caregivers, managers, and teachers — as they seek to develop concrete and innovative solutions to the health-care needs of the population in a renewed approach to health care.

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