

Book Review

Clinical Wisdom and Interventions in Critical Care: A Thinking-in-Action Approach

Patricia Benner, Patricia Hooper-Kyriakidis, and Daphne Stannard
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The kind of theoretical or disengaged thinking and reasoning that are commonly taught to students stand in stark contrast to the engaged reasoning of expert clinicians that is based on an historical understanding of the patient and the contextual and relational knowledge of the situation. (p. 187)

This book documents the most current findings from the rich body of work launched by Patricia Benner and published in her landmark book *From Novice to Expert: Excellence and Power in Clinical Nursing Practice* (Benner, 1986). In relating the Dreyfus Model of Skill Acquisition to her study of nursing expertise, Benner illustrated the embodied, experiential — skilled know-how — nature of nursing knowledge. This challenged the prevailing linear, “top-down” view whereby expert clinical practice is believed to consist of an *application* of theoretical and research knowledge.

These ideas were elaborated in a subsequent study of 130 nurses in *Expertise in Nursing Practice: Caring, Clinical Judgment, and Ethics* (Benner, Tanner, & Chesla, 1996). These findings were integrated with a recent study of an additional 75 nurses published in this new volume, which aims in particular to document “thick descriptions” of nursing expertise in critical care nursing. The authors refer to this work as a naturalistic, descriptive ethnography (using interpretive phenomenology) examining critical care nursing practice among novice to expert nurses, as well as advanced practice nurses.

The first chapter provides an introduction to what the authors argue is the central phenomenon characterizing clinical expertise in critical care nursing: thinking-in-action. Thinking-in-action refers to the patterns of thought and action involved in engaged clinical and ethical reasoning that is responsive to rapidly changing clinical situations. In addition, the study samples and methods are described, illustrating the

wide range of critical care settings represented by the informant-nurses, caring for adult, pediatric, and neonatal populations. This chapter also introduces the reader to the authors' philosophical orientation on clinical judgement and skilful comportment.

Chapters 2 and 3 describe the two pervasive habits of thought and action identified by the authors: clinical grasp and clinical forethought. Clinical grasp (chapter 2) refers to a process of attunement that is responsive to an unfolding clinical situation. This involves a capacity to recognize meaningful clinical differences — “qualitative distinctions” — as well as skills in clinical puzzle-solving, recognizing changing clinical relevance, and developing clinical knowledge in specific patient populations. Clinical forethought (chapter 3) refers to thought processes whereby clinicians anticipate eventualities in everyday practice and take the corresponding preventive and corrective actions.

The remaining chapters discuss nine domains of practice that the authors refer to as “strong situations” — types of situations, characterized by common goals and concerns, that guide clinical judgement and action. Chapter 4 outlines key aspects of diagnosing and managing life-sustaining physiologic functions in unstable patients, as well as describing the links between the two commonly simultaneous functions of diagnosis and management. Shifting to a view of nursing expertise beyond the physiologic aspects, chapter 5 describes the know-how involved in mobilizing resources to ensure the effective management of a crisis.

Chapter 6 describes the complex expertise required in comforting the critically ill. The skilful nurse identifies the patient's comfort needs, judges what might be comforting in the particular situation, and undertakes a sophisticated constellation of bodily and relational comfort measures, while limiting the intrusion of critical care technology. Chapter 7 discusses the relational work of caring for patients' families by examining the clinical judgement and skill involved in providing information and support to families and encouraging them to participate in caring for the critically ill patient. Chapter 8 explains how the expert nurse prevents hazards in the technological environment of the critical care setting through skilful use and management of the technology. Chapter 9 examines the nursing expertise required to recognize and respond to the transition from curative to palliative care for patients where the “end of life” is judged as imminent.

Chapter 10 illustrates the expert nursing judgement and skill required to create a communicative context that fosters teamwork

and optimizes clinical care (through the effective communication of clinical transitions, changes in practices, and new clinical knowledge). Chapter 11 describes the clinical expertise involved in monitoring everyday quality of care and the preventive and corrective management of system breakdown (currently attributable to major changes in delivery systems, such as various cost-cutting measures). In chapter 12, clinical leadership is examined as a form of expertise, along with the skills involved in the promotion of team building and the development of the skills of others.

Appendix A provides a detailed description of the study's design, including informant recruitment, data-collection procedures, and interview questions and probes. Unfortunately the analysis section is very brief, wherein the reader is referred to an earlier publication (Benner et al., 1996). Appendix B discusses innovative educational strategies that can help foster a thinking-in-action orientation "in the classroom." Finally, the authors have provided an excellent glossary that will be particularly helpful for readers who are unfamiliar with the terms associated with this body of work.

This book extends the tradition established by Patricia Benner and her colleagues, in their earlier work, in illuminating our comprehension of nursing expertise by explicating its tremendous complexity. It challenges our quasi-dogmatic over-reliance on static, linear models of nursing education (such as classroom teaching of clinical phenomena) and nursing management (such as attempts to define nursing with critical pathways, protocols, and guidelines). The depth of this study of critical care nursing is profound. Every identified theme is very well supported with rich narrative exemplars.

Given the extraordinary importance of this work, it is difficult to discuss its limitations. However, in the interests of ensuring the completeness of this review, two critical reflections will be outlined.

First, it would have been useful if the authors had presented a critical analysis of the pertinence of their current work to non-critical care settings, given the widespread interest in the ideas of Benner and her associates across a diversity of nursing specialties. Second, the authors have gone to great lengths to orient the reader to how clinical expertise involves an embodied practical mastery, yet, remarkably, virtually all of their exemplars are self-reports. These consist of formal interviews or observational interviews (with the exception of several observational notes in chapter 6 and one case in chapter 11). Self-report narratives of significant situations run the risk of bearing the characteristics of a "good story" that is cohesive and expressive of a central "plot." Clinical

practice can be "messier" and less articulable than the types of accounts that are presented in this book. Given the practice-oriented view of expertise the authors promote, a significant body of observational data should have been presented and discussed in terms of how they converged and diverged with the interview data. This would have given the reader a more comprehensive and holistic representation of nursing expertise.

In conclusion, this is an extraordinary and important book. Every nursing educator and manager, in particular, should read it in order to foster the development of nursing with a richer grasp of nursing expertise and practice.

References

- Benner, P. (1984). *From novice to expert: Excellence and power in clinical nursing practice*. Menlo Park, CA: Addison-Wesley.
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