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Angel in blue or registered mental health nurse?

The impact of the angel and hero narrative on student mental health nurses

Abstract

This is a critical reflection and discourse around the significance of Covid-19 and the media portrayal of nursing on student nurses and prospective students. During the pandemic nurses were referred to as 'angels' and 'heroes.' This impacted public perceptions of nursing and nursing students' perceptions of what it is to be a nurse. Nursing students were inspired and motivated by heroic and angelic concepts which do not adequately represent modern nursing. This paper depicts an honest, brave, and insightful learning journey of one student mental health nurse. It serves as a reminder to both nurses, students, and the public, that nurses are not merely angels or heroes. We are accountable educated professionals.

Introduction

The covid-19 pandemic was one of the most significant global health challenges of the 21st century. Universal healthcare systems experienced unprecedented upheaval, trauma, and moral challenges. Healthcare professionals found themselves on the frontline, attempting to fight the virus as it indiscriminately spread across continents. Nurses played a fundamental part in the battle against covid-19, whilst maintaining essential healthcare systems throughout the

pandemic. Nurses went to work without any guarantee of personal safety and faced elevated risk of infection of the virus. Often without adequate personal protective equipment (PPE) nurses risked their own, and their loved one's personal safety.

A global media narrative emerged embodying ideas and images of angels and heroes. Newspaper reports from Italy (Bellieni 2020), Australia (Stokes-Parish et al. 2020), Denmark (Halberg, Jensen, Larsen 2021) and across the world impacted public perceptions of a nurse. International interpretations of nurses shifted towards this idealised perception of the role of the nurse. Student nurses joining educational programmes were motivated by this unrealistic and unfounded perception of what it means to be a nurse. This paper asserts that this was both detrimental to registered nurses and prospective student nurses alike.

Angels and Heroes

A dictionary definition of 'angel' describes a celestial being often depicted as a benevolent intermediate between humans and the divine ((Merriam-Webster n.d.) Angels possess supernatural abilities and are traditionally viewed as kind and protective. In a similar manner, a hero describes someone who is admired for exceptional courage and bravery. A hero embodies concepts such as fearlessness, confronting danger, and putting oneself at risk for others. Their character is seen as noble, empathic, and compassionate ((Merriam-Webster. n.d.).

During the covid-19 pandemic a rhetoric embodying the concepts of angel and heroes was universally adopted. This led to patients and the public across the world making the terms angel and nurse seemingly synonymous. The UK prime minister and Royal Family religiously clapped for the NHS weekly and called health care professionals heroes. It is important to acknowledge that the media coverage was noble in intent.   It did however overshadow crucial aspects of the role of the nurse, presenting nursing in a one-dimensional manner.   Nurses were perceived as embodying powerful concepts such as divine abilities, supernatural powers, and self-sacrificing bravery. Many student nurses joining pre-

registration nursing programmes were motivated and influenced by these concepts of angel and hero.

Becoming a student nurse during the Covid-19 pandemic

Starting my (****) nursing journey a year following the start of the pandemic in the UK was unique and unprecedented. Never had the UK public, politicians and royal family clapped on doorsteps across the country in appreciation of the work of the NHS. My family and friends also called me an "angel" and "hero" which I felt proud of. I began my journey as a student nurse inspired by the UK National Health Service (NHS) and international efforts of nurses in the fight against Covid-19.

Becoming a student nurse in the pandemic led me to believe I should be an 'angel' for mental health service users.   In my first year of practice, I wanted to do anything and everything I could for each service user. I strived to solve all problems for them and meet all their needs. This was in line with the concepts of an angel.   My intentions and motivation were good. I wanted to help. I felt proud of myself. I believed I was embodying the required media concepts of an angel and hero.

Discussion

According to Halberg et al (2021) the media narrative about healthcare workers during the pandemic had become identity constructing. This occurred for Lucy and arguably many more student nurses who embraced the heroic and supernatural narrative. This was problematic, as the complexity and depth of the role of the mental health nurse is not nearly summed up in one dimensional concept of angel or heroes.   This paper concurs with Cox (2020) that caution must be used regarding the overuse of terms like angel and hero.   Healthcare workers are not duty bound to do everything in their power to support their patients at any level of personal risk.

Angel and hero constructs undermine the professionalism of nursing practice (Stokes-Parish et al. 2020). The notions of angel and hero are narrow and one dimensional. As with Lucy's experiences, it can limit the focus of student nurses. Other qualities and expectations of a nurse

that are not encapsulated within these concepts are at risk of being ignored, or simply not recognised as important. The skill, training, and knowledge that underpins nursing practice are disregarded when supernatural qualities are associated with the role of the nurse.   The need to be professional, aware of evidence-based practice, preserving the safety of service users, are not neatly summed up by the angel or hero narrative.

Research by Halberg et al ((2021) found that nursing staff rejected a narrative that embodies concepts such as invincibility and self-sacrifice. This is reassuring; however, the study was conducted in Denmark and other countries may demonstrate a different outcome. It also focuses on registered nurses, rather than student nurses. There is a gap in the literature regarding the impact the angel and hero narrative had on student nurse recruitment, retention, and attitudes towards the role of the nurse. This paper speculates whether student nurses were as easily able to reject this narrative as qualified nurses were in Denmark.

The role of the nurse beyond angel or hero

Over the course of my (****) placements, and the learning experiences I was exposed to, I revised my concepts around what it meant to be a good nurse. I thankfully and eventually abandoned the concepts of angel and hero. Through critical reflection I realised I was narrowly focused on just one aspect of the role of the nurse which was compassion and prioritising service user's needs. I thought this fitted with the concepts of an angel and hero. However, I was neglecting other skills and qualities by trying to be the one-dimensional supernatural figure for service users.

In my first year of nurse education, I wanted to solve all problems for service users, in line with the concept of angel or hero. I believed that to be a nurse, I must be likened to an angel. I should be compassionate and caring. Using the media as a guide during the pandemic like so many others, I thought I knew what would be best for patients. However, now that I have utilised evidence and reflected on service user's feedback, extrinsically and intrinsically, I understand how important all aspects of the role of the nurse are.

In my professional and personal experience, service users do not want or need an angel or hero. Service users benefit more from having an accountable professional, educated to degree level with qualities such as compassion and courage, rather than professionals focused on being perceived as an angel. Now that I am in my final year of training, I have realised that I am not an angel or a hero. I am a skilled mental health nurse, and that is exactly what the NHS and service users need.

Discussion

The role of a mental health nurse has a uniqueness which far transcends the simplicity of an archetypal angel or hero. Part of ****'s personal and professional development was a critical reflection on what it means to be a good mental health nurse. Mental health nurses have been historically poor at clearly defining their role.   (Connell et al. 2022)argue that there has been a dissolution of mental health nursing identity following a review of educational standards in the UK. Whilst this paper has made the case that mental health nurses cannot be compared to angels or heroes, Connell et al (2022) argue they cannot be compared to generic, or adult nurses. Mental health nurses cannot be reduced to a generic skill set of physical health procedures.

It is imperative that student mental health nurses are provided with an education that equips them to provide high quality, compassionate mental health nursing care. Opportunities for reflection on personal values, and preconceived ideas of what it means to be a good mental health nurse need to be embedded into mental health nurse education. Angelic and heroic concepts must be dispelled. The unique skill set of mental health nurses are irreducible to such one-dimensional concepts (Fisher 2023).

The angelic and hero narrative also displaces the responsibility of politics, society, and healthcare systems. It imposes responsibility onto the individual healthcare workers (Halberg, Jensen, Larsen 2021) This is in line with questionable neoliberal concepts, that force responsibility onto practitioners, whilst ignoring the role of systemic health care policies, values and procedures.

Rebutting angel and hero concepts

This paper has argued that becoming a student nurse during the Covid-19 pandemic, encouraged a narrow focus on the role of the nurse. This was encouraged by the media portrayal of nursing being synonymous to angels and heroes. It is vital for the individual nurse and patients, that student nurses mature and modify their beliefs about the role of the nurse. Through their transition from student to registered nurse, a new understanding of nursing must be developed. One that is in line with nursing being far more complex and nuanced than the simplistic media portrayal of angel or hero.

To achieve true person-centred and compassionate care, the notions of angel and hero must be abandoned. Mental health nursing is far more complex and nuanced that these archetypal concepts can possibly depict. Service users value nurses who are compassionate, however the value of advanced interpersonal skills must not be un underestimated or devalued (Fisher 2023)This paper implores student nurses, registered nurses, academics, and nurse educators to abandon the concepts of angel and hero.

Conclusion

The angel and hero narratives that emerged globally during the Covid-19 pandemic are problematic for nursing education and practice. Healthcare systems are still experiencing the aftermath of the covid 19 pandemic. The concepts of angel and hero impacted public perceptions of nursing. In addition, they influenced prospective nursing students. If student nurses are unable to mature past these one-dimensional idealisations of the role of the nurse, it will have a negative impact on both the individual nurse, and service users. Academic institutions have a role to play in ensuring mental health nurse education reflects the true role of a mental health nurse. Nurses must unite to reclaim their true and rightful identity which is far more complex and unique that simplistic ideas of angels and heroes.

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