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Who is that nurse? Transferring knowledge requires clarity about professional titles

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Dear Editor,

A challenge that scientists conducting research in nursing face every time they write an academic paper is how to correctly report which nursing staff members were included in their study. Often, several grades of nursing staff collaborate and in many published research reports the description of participating nursing staff is unclear, insufficient and not understandable outside or even within the country where the study took place. A consequence is that the transfer of knowledge from scientific

studies to practice is hampered. What we are missing is an international standardisation of professional nursing titles.

Take, for example, the situation in the Netherlands. We performed a literature search of studies conducted in Dutch nursing homes, including nursing staff as the study population (n = 61). The search showed that different titles are used: nurse, caregiver, carer, nursing staff member, nurse aide, care assistant, nurse assistant, certified nursing assistant, licensed practical nurse, registered nurse, certified vocational nurse, vocationally trained nurse, vocationally trained registered nurse, bachelor degree nurse and baccalaureate-educated registered nurse. In most of the included articles, a specification of 'nurse' was missing with regard to their grade. When making comparisons between countries the problem gets worse. For example, in the United States nurse assistants are often trained for only a few months, while in the Netherlands certified nurse assistants follow a one and a half to three year training program. To sum up, we use different titles for the same functions and use of the same title does not automatically relate to the same function or grade.

As a solution, we suggest a standardisation of professional titles for nurses at different qualification levels. Fortunately, the European Commission developed the European Qualifications Framework (EQF) (European Commission, 2008). This framework classifies qualification levels of professionals to understand and compare national qualifications awarded in different European countries. The European Qualifications Framework is a suitable tool for standardising the description of nursing staff members and improving the transferability of study results. But to date, the European Qualifications Framework is seldom used in European nursing literature. Moreover, when used, reference to the European Qualifications Framework clarifies educational levels, but it does not address the issue of professional titles.

Therefore, we propose a Delphi study in European countries in which different professional titles of nursing functions are linked to the European Qualifications Framework levels (Keeney et al., 2011). The Delphi study would result in a) national overviews of nursing staff members linked to European Qualifications Framework levels; and b) European consensus of nursing titles for each European Qualifications Framework level. This will create clarity as to the titles, content and context of nursing staff in Europe (Cowan and Wilson-Barnett, 2006; Kroezen et al., 2018; Rafferty et al., 2019; Roy, 2015). Upon completion, a next step would be to extend this study to countries outside Europe.

In short, the professional titles of nursing staff members are incomprehensible. To facilitate international knowledge transfer, consensus is required about professional titles of involved nursing staff members. So let's start a naming ceremony! Who will join us?

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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