A commitment to continuing education is imperative to maintaining a current knowledge base in research, as well as service a demanding health care system while balancing the needs of their personal lives. How are these professionals expected to keep up with all the competing forces? A nursing journal club is one educational strategy that allows for new research findings to be disseminated in a social and welcoming environment.

This article analyzes the current published literature about nursing journal clubs and discusses the proven efficacy of such journal clubs in skill development (i.e., reading research and critical appraisal) and continuing education, as well as increasing evidence-based practices among nurses. Key terms pertinent to the subject will be defined for greater understanding. The trend of journal clubs in the context of current educational practices also will be explored. To appreciate journal clubs, benefits and limitations of the initiative will be investigated. Identifying knowledge gaps in the current literature will provide suggestions for future research. Finally, strategies for successful journal club implementation will also be presented. This article will clarify why nursing journal clubs are an effective teaching strategy within the clinical setting.

INTRODUCING THE NURSING JOURNAL CLUB

Historical Background

Journal clubs originated within the medical profession more than 100 years ago. Founded by a physician...
with a particular devotion to medical education, the first recorded journal club was started by Sir William Osler at McGill University in Montreal in 1875 (Kleinpell, 2002; Nesbitt & Barton, 2014). Osler appreciated the expense associated with costly journal subscriptions, and he wanted to share purchased materials among colleagues who likely could not afford the materials for knowledge propagation. The process of acquiring and distributing material among like-minded colleagues transformed into a book and journal club where attendees congregated over dinner to review the latest evidence in medical research (Kleinpell, 2002).

**Definition and Importance**

Journal clubs continue to be used in medical education today. Other health disciplines, particularly nursing, have adopted this effective teaching strategy in an effort to create awareness of research and promote evidence-based practices. A “nursing journal club refers to meetings where nursing staff convene to discuss the use of research knowledge in clinical nursing practice based on a study presented to them” (Mattila, Rekola, Koporonen, & Eriksson, 2013, p. 424). A quantitative study found that using journal clubs as a teaching strategy for nursing education contributes to skill development in professional discussion, research appraisal, and applying learned results to clinical practice (Mattila et al., 2013). Sortedahl (2012) stated that circulation of knowledge is a social process and new ideas must be exchanged between peers. Journal clubs serve as an informal learning environment where difficult topics can be openly discussed and where nurses can nurture their inner voices and develop perspectives as well as identify their role in nursing (Doughty, 2013; Luby, Riley, & Towne, 2006).

**Philosophy of Adult Learning**

Adult learners comprise the vast majority of journal club participants. Therefore, it is imperative to appreciate the foundations on which learning occurs. Andragogy is focused on teaching strategies for the adult learner and therefore is an important concept in nursing journal clubs. Participants within journal clubs share characteristics in progressive and humanist learning philosophies. Within the progressive philosophy, the learner’s needs, interests, and experiences are key elements in learning (Zinn, 1990). Complementary to these qualities is the humanist learning philosophy where the learner is highly motivated and self-directed (Zinn, 1990). The role of the progressive teacher is to organize and guide learning through educational experiences (Zinn, 1990). Similarly, a teacher within the humanist philosophy takes on a facilitator role. These teachers engage in a partnership and help guide and promote learning but do not direct it (Zinn, 1990).

Nesbitt and Barton (2014) believe journal club participants are pragmatic, social constructivists and require a tangible use for the knowledge presented. These learners “believe that learning does not occur in isolation but is built on and interpreted with others in the context of prior knowledge and experiences” (Nesbitt & Barton, pp. 4-5). The theoretical study by Campbell-Fleming, Catania, and Courtney (2009) corroborates the learning styles of adult learners by suggesting deeper, more meaningful learning occurs when directed independently, and in addition, critical thinking skills are improved.

**Defining Key Terms**

*Continuing education and evidence-based practice are key terms associated with journal clubs, and therefore it is important to understand their meanings. Continuing education is defined as “any postbasic nursing education aimed at actively engaging nurses in a lifelong process of learning, with the ultimate goal of improving delivery of health care” (Griscti & Jacono, 2006, p. 450). Continuing education opportunities take on many forms, where some are formal (e.g., professional conferences) or informal (e.g., “lunch and learn” hospital in-service sessions). Regardless of the circumstance, the end result of continuing education is improved care provision to the patients within the nurse’s care. Coupled with continuing education, evidence-based practice strives to improve patient outcomes.*

*Evidence-based nursing practice is defined as the “integration of the best evidence available, nursing expertise, and the values and preferences of the individuals, families and communities who are served” (Sigma Theta Tau International, 2005, para. 4). Evidence-based practice has numerous advantages including improving patient outcomes through decreased medical errors and mortality rates, continuity of care, and professional engagement; evidence-based practice also is a constituent to acquiring a Magnet designation status and helps lower health care costs for the patient and institution (Patel et al., 2011). Numerous barriers have been identified in the literature that encumber initiatives to implement evidence-based practice among nurses. Organizational barriers, lack of administrative support, strong hierarchies, lack of resources and time, poor comprehension of research, and difficulty with critical appraisals and evaluating evidence all deter evidence-based practice (Campbell-Fleming et al., 2009; Laaksonen, Paltta, von Schantz, Ylönen, & Soini, 2013; Sortedahl, 2012). The perceived lack of authority and autonomy by frontline nurses to influence
practice changes is an added barrier to evidence-based practice (Nesbitt & Barton, 2014).

Overcoming these barriers for implementation of evidence-based practice is important as health care practices change readily with new research. Journal clubs can help ease the process of bridging gaps between research and clinical practice. To use the knowledge that research creates to guide nursing practice, Mattila et al. (2013) believe nurses need to understand the structure and results of the articles that they are reading to achieve knowledge translation. Journal clubs satisfy this requirement by helping to improve skills in reading research and critical appraisal among nurses. The theoretical review by Profetto-McGrath (2005) suggests evidence requires effective implementation in practice for it to be useful. Sortedahl (2012) adds there are numerous components involved in ensuring evidence reaches nurses for practice integration. Innovation, means of communication, time, and a social system are all imperative integral factors for implementing evidence. Using a journal club for dissemination of evidence would serve these requirements adequately and also promote continuing education.

**LITERATURE REVIEW**

This literature review analyzed 20 articles ranging in content and focus. Articles that met the inclusion criteria for this review discussed evidence-based practice, continuing education, and skill development in the context of nursing journal clubs. Any article that evaluated the efficacy of the journal club as a teaching strategy for nurses also was included. Finally, the discussion of benefits, limitations, and suggestions of prospective research were included for review.

The types of literature reviewed varied greatly. An effort to include mostly research-based articles fell short due to the lack of research available about nursing journal clubs. Two anecdotal articles and two editorial articles were included for their experiential contributions to nursing journal clubs. The literature review was one half of a two-part analysis, which evaluated pedagogy and evidence-based practices. The qualitative research-based counterpart studied student-led learning sessions for a grassroots initiative for evidence-based practices. Eight theoretically based papers comprised the majority of research, and these appraisals provided substantial knowledge about benefits and limitations of journal clubs as a teaching strategy and learning outcomes for nurses. Four qualitative and three quantitative research-based articles were included to bring a current research perspective. Finally, one seminal theoretical article was included as it was one of few early publications to encourage nursing journal club leadership.

**CURRENT NURSING JOURNAL CLUB TRENDS**

The evidence presented suggests that journal clubs are not a new concept in teaching within health care. It is uncertain at what point nursing adopted this practice of teaching; however, the literature proposes that this is a novel venture for nurse professionals. Nursing journal clubs are slowly being integrated in teaching hospitals that value evidence-based practices. Journal clubs are teaching strategies within most residency and postgraduate training programs for physicians, and due to their success, journal clubs are being adopted by other health care professions (Nesbitt & Barton, 2014). As the teaching strategy grows in popularity among health disciplines, several benefits have been cited to promote the use of journal clubs.

**BENEFITS OF NURSING JOURNAL CLUBS**

The literature has revealed numerous benefits to nursing journal clubs. The most frequently cited benefits of journal clubs will be analyzed first, followed by benefits pertaining to personal and professional development, and concluding with incentives for health care organizations.

**Most Commonly Cited Benefits**

The benefit cited most frequently in the peer-reviewed articles is that nursing journal clubs allowed nurses to keep current with new research and use evidence-based practice to guide nursing care (Campbell-Fleming et al., 2009; Jenkins, Woith, Stenger, & Kerber, 2014; Laaksonen et al., 2013; Luby et al., 2006; Patel et al., 2011; Sheehan, 1994; Sortedahl, 2012; St. Pierre, 2005; Steenbeek et al., 2009). The second finding was that nurses developed skills in their abilities to read and critically appraise research (Goodfellow, 2004; Mattila et al., 2013; Moch, Cronje, & Branson, 2010; Patel et al., 2011; Profetto-McGrath, 2005; Sheehan, 1994; St. Pierre, 2005; Steenbeek et al., 2009). The third finding was that journal clubs facilitated learning of evidence-based practice, which can bridge gaps between research and clinical practice (Campbell-Fleming et al., 2009; Goodfellow, 2004; Kleinpell, 2002; Luby et al., 2006; Mattila et al., 2013; Moch et al., 2010; Profetto-McGrath, 2005). The fourth finding was that nursing journal clubs promote interdisciplinary collaboration, team building, and professional discussions (Laaksonen et al., 2013; Luby et al., 2006; Mattila et al., 2013; Patel et al., 2011). Nesbitt and Barton (2014) corroborated this finding in their theoretical article that suggests “engaging nurses with research...
through peer social interaction promotes acceptance and buy-in, making greater knowledge translation achievable” (p. 3). The fifth finding substantiates the former claim, stating that nurses are more receptive and open-minded to evidence-based practices when they are involved in journal clubs (Laaksonen et al., 2013; Mattila et al., 2013).

**Personal and Professional Development**

Some benefits with fewer citations have equal merit in validating the use of nursing journal clubs and therefore are important to mention and relate to personal and professional development. Journal clubs promote continuing education and often are counted toward continuing education credits (Campbell-Fleming et al., 2009; Patel et al., 2011). This commitment represents taking initiative and responsibility to furthering their knowledge (Griscti & Jacono, 2006). In addition, nurses form habits of reading professional journal articles on a more frequent basis when engaging in journal clubs (Sheehan, 1994; Sortedahl, 2012). Kleinpell (2002) suggests journal clubs encourage research use. Goodfellow (2004) noted that, “Research utilization promotes inquiry, encourages critical thinking and develops clinical judgment skills” (p. 107). The anecdotal articles of Silversides (2011) and Goodfellow (2004) found journal clubs demonstrate professionalism, boost morale, and create a sense of empowerment among nurses. Journal clubs also allow nurses to share their experiential knowledge, relate it to current research, and allow their peers to appraise their perspectives (Sheehan, 1994; Silversides, 2011).

**Incentives for Health Care Organizations**

In addition to personal and professional benefits for nurses, there are also incentives for health care organizations. Journal clubs can lead reforms in hospital policies for optimal patient outcomes (Goodfellow, 2004; Jenkins et al., 2014; Silversides, 2011). Unfortunately, many frontline nurses believe they have no power over influencing changes to patient care (Goodfellow, 2004; Nesbitt & Barton, 2014). Patel et al. (2011) and Wiggy (2012) found journal clubs can identify clinical problems or knowledge gaps within a patient care population. The facilitator often will incorporate nurses into planning session topics, and this is an opportunity for nurses to identify gaps within their knowledge or areas within clinical practice that they do not feel they are supported in. To corroborate this, Mattila et al. (2013) found journal clubs decreased communication barriers between nurses and the organization, and also created awareness of studies in the profession. Finally, Profetto-McGrath (2005) found that journal clubs add context and purpose for information synthesis and improve critical thinking skills.

**LIMITATIONS OF NURSING JOURNAL CLUBS**

Although the advantages of nursing journal clubs outweigh the limitations, there are a few limitations that need recognition to help overcome these barriers. Participation, technical process barriers, and efforts not reflected in policy changes are all weaknesses perceived in the literature that hinder successful journal clubs.

**Participation and Attendance**

Participation and attendance are the most common criticisms found in the literature that impact the success of nursing journal clubs. Because journal clubs are an extracurricular, voluntary activity driven purely out of interest for continuing education and self-motivation by the individual nurse (Griscti & Jacono, 2006), attendance was found to be a common issue. Second, there was an ironic misconception that journal clubs could expose a nurse’s weakness in academia, creating a sense of vulnerability and therefore discouraging participation (Goodfellow, 2004). Substantiating this finding, participants in the Steenbeek et al. (2009) quantitative study said they had difficulty understanding the research articles. This perception is consistent with nurses in the majority of studies, which is why the journal club teaching model is so advantageous in both medical and nursing professions. The goals of journal clubs are to help improve critical appraisal skills and research comprehension. It is the responsibility of the facilitator to remind prospective attendees that a journal club is a laid-back social gathering intended to explore current research collaboratively, and although encouraged, reading the assigned articles is not mandatory for attendance. Nesbitt and Barton (2014) provided advice on confronting this barrier. They instructed facilitators to clarify that “the only admission criteria for [the] club are an appetite, an opinion, and a bedside PhD obtained through clinical nursing experience” (p. 6). Adding a mandatory component to a voluntary activity creates an obligatory undertone and likely would de-motivate the otherwise willing participant.

Additional barriers affecting participation noted in the literature are important to acknowledge. In their qualitative study, Laaksonen et al. (2013) evaluated students’ perceptions of journal clubs and found that although they gained skill and confidence in reading research articles, journal clubs were perceived as demanding. Irrelevant or disinteresting topics, lack of interest in reading articles, poor working conditions or employ-
ment commitments, understaffing, family commitments, and meeting times also have been attributed to hindering involvement (Griscti & Jacono, 2006; Laaksonen et al., 2013; Steenbeek et al., 2009).

Finally, it is understandable that journal clubs do not foster the same sense of excitement or allure that other hobbies have and therefore can be perceived as dry and unstimulating (St. Pierre, 2005). One way to overcome this is by identifying an incentive for attendance. A common initiative is for the facilitator to provide dinner and beverages for attendees in exchange for participation and promoting discussion. It would be the responsibility of the facilitator to seek out opportunities for funding, unless otherwise agreed on by the nursing unit (this is infrequently the case).

Technical Process of Facilitation and Implementation

A second category of limitations with journal clubs involves the technical process of implementation (Laaksonen et al., 2013; Sortedahl, 2012). Participants in two studies revealed that one obstacle was participants being unable to locate the articles (Sortedahl, 2012; Steenbeek et al., 2009). One way to overcome this is to make numerous copies of the articles and have them readily available to minimize this deterrent.

A second developmental issue was identified by Laaksonen et al. (2013) in their qualitative study. Findings suggested that the nurses felt not enough articles were available for the journal club to form educated opinions. In addition, the nurses preferred more time for the journal club meetings. Analyzing the studies involved in this literature review showed meeting times ranged from 45 to 90 minutes. More research is required about the appropriate length of journal club meetings and the number of articles to be included.

Impacting Policy Change From a Grassroots Initiative

A final barrier found by Patel et al. (2011) in their theoretical article was that evidence-based practices revealed in grassroots journal club initiatives would be arduous to implement within an organization. Policy changes in some hospitals need to be approved by various committees, thus delaying implementation of evidence-based practices (Patel et al., 2011). It could be deduced that although the cause is good, participants may feel their efforts may be wasted in trying to advance evidence-based practices within their organization. As mentioned previously, journal clubs can have an effect on policy change and can improve communication between clinical frontline nurses and policy makers. It is important to remind participants that they can make a difference. Acknowledging the limitations of journal clubs is an important tool for growth of the initiative. By identifying problem areas, scholars and researchers can conduct further investigations to bridge these knowledge gaps. Doing this can improve participation and help clubs run efficiently by refining the technical process as well as impact policy change from a grassroots initiative.

RESEARCH ON NURSING JOURNAL CLUBS: BRIDGING KNOWLEDGE GAPS

Although journal clubs are a long-standing and successful teaching strategy within the medical profession, such clubs are new to nursing. Regardless of the longevity of journal clubs, current research remains limited (Mattila et al., 2013). Suggestions for future research were touched on in the discussion of limitations, and the literature reviewed provides more guidance. Most of the suggestions pertained to participation, which was identified in the majority research findings as the greatest problem area. First, the number of attendees to journal clubs is an area requiring further research. Too few participants may not cultivate a diverse discussion, whereas too many participants may hinder reflective discussion (Laaksonen et al., 2013) or create difficulty in managing group dynamics. Nesbitt and Barton (2014) stated, “it is essential to hear as many differing points of view within discussion to provide the best chance at solving whatever clinical problems are on the table” (p. 7).

Second, the theoretical review by Griscti and Jacono (2006) encouraged future studies to evaluate why nurses are unconcerned in maintaining their education. In addition, on the subject of attendance, journal clubs today operate using physical locations and in-person meetings. However, there is growing popularity of facilitating journal clubs online (Sortedahl, 2012), likely as a result of improved access to technology and busy personal lives. This facilitates remote attendance for individuals unable to meet at a physical location for greater participation (Wiggy, 2012). More research is required for this method, including optimal online software selection, number of sessions, and participant discussions (Sortedahl, 2012). Consideration must be given to how the communal and collaborative atmospheres of journal clubs will be affected if a more isolated technological method was used. After all, one of the goals of journal clubs is to create a social learning environment.

Finally, it has been mentioned that journal clubs have been successful initiatives among several professions. If a
<key_points>

**Nursing Journal Clubs**

1. Journal clubs are a favorable teaching method among health care professionals, and this novel practice for nurses should be more widely considered among education leaders as a worthwhile investment.

2. Journal clubs help build numerous professional skills, including public speaking, presentation skills, reading comprehension for scholarly articles, and leadership qualities.

3. The greatest benefit of nursing journal clubs is that nurses can remain abreast of current research and evidence-based practices within nursing.

4. Continuing education and evidence-based practices are the valued pillars of foundation on which journal clubs develop.

care area has multiple disciplines working collaboratively, the literature suggests that interdisciplinary journal clubs could be a future option, and their benefits should be studied (Mattila et al., 2013). It is possible that interdisciplinary journal clubs may improve teamwork and collaboration among disciplines, as it has been proven to do so among nurse colleagues.

**STRATEGIES FOR SUCCESSFUL JOURNAL CLUB OUTCOMES**

As a result of scrutinizing the benefits and limitations of journal clubs, several strategies were identified that contribute to successful journal club outcomes. These strategies have been classified as either responsibilities of the facilitator and presenter or process responsibilities.

**Strategies for the Facilitator or Presenter**

Laaksonen et al. (2013) found that a strong leader was motivating, helped facilitate discussions, and contributed to collaboration. Sortedahl (2012) noted that knowledgeable presenters contributed to successful journal clubs. The same expectations apply to journal club facilitators and presenters as they do to nursing clinical instructors or nursing educators. Clinical competency, adequate knowledge, and comprehension of the subject have been proven characteristics of successful clinical educators (Gignac-Caille & Oermann, 2001). It is important that facilitators are motivated and enthusiastic about their cause to promote interest. Participants are unlikely to attend if the facilitator appears to be disinterested in the initiative.

**Strategies for Improving the Journal Club Process**

Guidelines for facilitating journal clubs can vary from one hospital organization to another and from one nursing care area to another (e.g., intensive care units versus medical–surgical units). Despite such variability, a few common strategies that correlate to successful outcomes were found in the literature. Kleinpell (2002) summarized key strategies of a successful journal club; these included promoting interest, encouraging attendance, appointing a leader or facilitator to organize the discussion, and selecting an appropriate location and time. Mattila et al. (2013) and Sortedahl (2012) noted that providing articles on an interesting or practical topic for participants to read in advance is a good tactic as well as setting clear objectives, eliminating technical difficulties, and increasing time for discussion. Again, it is important to remind all nurses that they are welcome to attend even if they have not completed the readings (Nesbitt & Barton, 2014; St. Pierre, 2005). There are many articles referenced in this review that include step-by-step guidelines on how to begin a journal club at a health care institution.

**CONCLUSION**

Without question, implementing journal clubs is an efficacious teaching strategy. The main goals of the initiative are to help nurses become more familiar with reading research, develop skills in critically appraising research, promote continuing education, and adopt evidence-based practices for improved patient care. Journal clubs are growing in popularity across health disciplines as the benefits far outweigh the limitations. Still, it is necessary to recognize the limitations for progression and improvement, as well as identify knowledge gaps for future research. The informal nature of journal clubs allows the facilitator creative liberties to create a process best suited for the needs of the participating nurses. However, prospective facilitators should be mindful of the common strategies shown to correlate with more successful journal club outcomes. For nurses who may ask why journal club participation is important, as Luby et al. (2006, p. 101) stated, “studying research reminds us that we are not just nurses doing tasks, we are scientists practicing the science of nursing.”

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