

What older adults in Aotearoa would like nursing students to know: Findings from the research

Readying nursing students for culturally grounded practice that supports a new vision of older persons' healthcare environments

In 2024, an AARIA funded research inquiry interviewed older adults from different ethnicities about their experiences of healthcare, and what keeps them well. The following statements offer a snapshot of what these participants wanted to share. Naturally, not everyone from the same cultural background will hold identical views, but these comments are shared as conversation starters...



For everyone

We are the same as you, not different. An old person has done all the things you've done. Fallen in love; out of love; had dramas. Old people have done all that and more. And it's the lucky people in life that get to be old!

Ageism, with value judgements about older people: "They're cute and lovely"; "creepy old men"; Older people are racist".

You need to remember when you go into my room, that this is my home. That's why we are called RESIDENTS

It's challenging for a young person, but it's life, not a sickness.

Do you love your job? Is nursing a vocation, or just a way to earn a good salary, and gain professional status? If people are in the job for money, you can tell. Imagine this staff member or patient was someone in your own family, your Mum or Dad. Better to start a conversation. Ask about their families. Relax. You can get a lot done by being friendly.

I observed it recently with friends in a rest home who were dying and they got served a great big meal of meat and three veg at lunchtime and they were dying. Well how silly - why weren't they served something smooth and soft because they really didn't need food but their stage and place wasn't acknowledged.

NZ is a hugging culture. You have to ask - is it all right if I hug you?

Chinese

We might prefer rice for breakfast - why is it seen only as a dinner item?

A doctor who came to see me knelt on the floor to be on my level talking to me. In China, you only kneel to the gods, or to show great respect, or proposing marriage - so I didn't expect it!

In Chinese culture, we protect our loved ones from bad news if we can. Mum's own mother died of a tumour, and all the family knew, even Mum's sister who is a doctor, but no one ever told her it was anything but an infection.

My Chinese friends and I talk on WeChat, and share medical things that way - or phoning home to talk to a doctor in China, getting a diagnosis over the phone, and following their advice about what to take.

In these days of AI, nurses should be using translation apps, making sure that patients understand, rather than just answering "Yes" and "No" at random to satisfy whoever is taking down a history.

Not all Chinese people feel the same, but for my husband and myself - Don't offer us sushi - it's been rolled in someone's hands - we will only eat cooked food.

When I had to have an MRI admission they found that the machine had a language selection on it and they figured out how to make it work for me.

When you've been sick, we don't eat cold food - like salad, ice cream, yoghurt.

We don't drink tap water. In our country you can't be sure it's clean. And we don't drink ice in our water - we believe that drinking water that is colder than body temperature shocks the body. We drink hot water, rather than English tea or coffee.

"You are your own, culturally-created being - and so is every older adult you encounter"

Indian

Putting medicine into someone's open palm is very uncomfortable - if you come from a country where beggars hold out their hands, it's ingrained.

Some nurses could be quite rude when treating our own people. For example, if they came from a higher socio-economic group, a high-caste, they might feel that doing personal care was beneath them.

For older Indians, it's good to acknowledge that we're worried - it doesn't work to just tell us, "It's OK."

Older Indians are always surrounded by family. Get an idea from them about the patient's level of English.

If there's trouble understanding, especially with different accents, write it down in English, so the patient can read the question. Sometimes it can help when there's an interpreter, but you need to remember every state in India has its own language, and there are hundreds of dialects too.

Kiwis are used to the system of asking people to talk about pain on a scale of 1-10. That's new to many of us - when someone is waiting for a response, it's easy to just choose a random number, trying to be helpful.

Māori

Nurses often underestimate importance of spirituality in nursing - I missed having karakia before meals

Using te reo, even kia ora as a greeting - even if the client isn't Māori - use it with everyone. Some people won't even notice, some will respond and smile, and some will show curiosity and ask - what does it mean?

For me, the powhiri is the foundation. It starts when I stand at the door. I wait. I'm showing my respect. It's the same as at a marae, you wait to be called to come on. My tipuna are behind me, and we are entering the elders' marae. I mightn't understand the culture of the person inside the room, but if I understand mine, that's the place I'm coming from. So I would say, a nurse needs to know her own culture.

Using language like sweetheart, dear, darling. I remember in one clinic, the staff saying to me, "We just call him 'koru'", as if that was showing the client respect. But I said no, he has a name, please use it. Just because you're using a Māori word, it's still not valid.

Take it slower, it'll be faster in the long run. Tinorangitiratanga needs to be respected. More whanaungatanga.

For some older Māori women, it's very important that only a female washes us - we'd rather not have a wash that have a male nurse.

Tikanga - blue pillowslips for heads, putting urinal bottles on tables - don't! How you dispose of hair.

Beware of tokenism and assumptions - on the admission board with photos and name cards for all the residents - a Māori border around the Māori patients - why? It's like a tick box - look! We've got 5 Māori patients here!

I remember seeing an older Māori woman in hospital asking for a tissue to blow her nose and being handed torn off pieces of toilet paper. What?!

Other ethnicities

When my husband was dying with dementia 11 years ago we had a lot of Filipino nurses and they were gentle and quiet, and just tuned into death in a different way. New Zealand nurses had great hearts too, but when someone's dying, they didn't really understand about being quiet.

Fiji is a third world country; and even though it might be staffed with Fijian nurses, speaking the Fijian language, being admitted to hospital there is still an alarming experience, especially for older people. This is even more so since the pandemic: you don't go there for them to save your life, you go there to lose your life - there's lots of talk like this on social media.

For Pacific People, having older people go into long-term care or a residential facility is frowned upon. Older people expect support from, and interaction with their extended families

Supporting people from different cultures starts with language, and communication. it's important nurses know some of the other tools that are available - local interpreter, Interpreting New Zealand telephone services, apps.

I come from Pakistan where to be gay is illegal and seen as bad...

