CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 INTRODUCTION

Currently, a lot of emphasis is being placed on the training of health care workers in the field of geriatrics and gerontology. This is because our population is progressively getting older and there is inadequate supply of professional health care workers to provide the specialized care that is required by this aged group.

As we can see, a rapidly aging population is now the trend in developed countries. In the United Sates, for instance, there are now millions of people in their eighties and nineties, and forty thousand are over the age of one hundred (Yong, New Sunday Times, February 1, 1998). Likewise, developing countries such as Malaysia are not spared as we are also heading in the same direction. Currently, people who are over the age of 60 years make up only about 5.9 percent of Malaysia’s population. However, by the year 2020, it is expected to reach 11.3 percent. It has not been until recently, that individual nations and the world community have focussed their attention on the social, economic, political and scientific concerns raised by the rapid growth in the number of older persons.

In Malaysia, the changing socioeconomic and demographic scenario may mean families are less able to be the focal of care, particularly for those who are sick who will require physical and financial support.
Presently, many regions of the world are experiencing a decline in infant mortality and birth rates. At the same time, improvements in nutrition, basic health care, increased awareness of the importance of a healthy lifestyle, and the control of infectious diseases have also contributed to the increase in the number and proportion of older persons.

There is a difference when dealing with the old in comparison with looking after the younger aged groups. When one talks about caring for the older person, one needs to take into consideration the physiological changes of aging, the presentation and treatment of diseases, the role of rehabilitation and the organization of medical, social and voluntary services.

Malaysia currently has a population with an increasing number of elderly people. Generally, the average life span is about 73 years for a male and 76 for a female. Although, some may still be very strong at this stage, the body generally tends to get more frail and sight may be failing. Reading and watching television for the elderly may not be possible and nights may run into days for some. Certain individuals may feel that at this age they are a burden to their families and to society and see little point in living. Thus, the very elderly have different needs to those who are ten years younger and are able to be a little more active.

As the elderly also usually faces multi factorial problems, all health care professionals involved in their care need to be well equipped with sound and appropriate knowledge, skills and attitude to ensure that they are well looked after physically, socially, psychologically, mentally and spiritually.

The primary aim of caring for the sick elderly person is to get them back on
their feet as soon as possible so that they can return home to their families and community and live as independent a life as possible.

Thus, it is of the utmost importance that all health care professionals involved in elderly care whether directly or indirectly, be well equipped with the right knowledge and attitude.

As such, the Government has taken an active role by committing to provide specialized medical services and allocating RM52 million for the setting up of geriatric units in all major hospitals under the Seventh Malaysia Plan.

Under the Plan, thirty new hospitals would be built at the cost of RM5.6 billion and twenty-seven hospitals costing RM2.7 billion not completed under the Sixth Plan would also be built now. Presently, RM1.5 billion has been spent on upgrading ten hospitals under the Seventh Malaysian Plan.

According to Datuk Chua Jui Meng, Minister of Health, (STAR, August 14, 1999), the country spent 3 percent of the gross domestic product on health care compared to 6.6 percent in South Korea, 8 percent in developed nations and 14 percent in the United States.

According to the Ministry of Health, the staffing of Geriatric units is not an easy task. Currently, there are only four (4) geriatricians in the country. Although, the Ministry of Health has for quite some time now offered scholarships for doctors to pursue master’s program in geriatrics, the response has been very disappointing.

The Ministry further added that, out of the four hundred (400) medical students who graduated in 1997, only two (2) or three (3) indicated interest to specialize in geriatrics. To meet the growing needs of the older persons for geriatric
care it is estimated that a minimum of fifteen new candidates are required every year. One should ask why the lack of interest in this branch of medicine. Can it be that looking after the elderly is not as challenging or glamorous as for example being a neuro- physician? This gives one the impression that not only do we have the daunting task of developing and providing services for this aged group, but we also need to change the mindset of these young graduates.

Currently, there is only one College of Nursing in Malaysia that provides post basic training for Registered Nurses in the care of the elderly.

In order to ensure the delivery of holistic geriatric care, a multidisciplinary approach is required. The geriatrician and his multidisciplinary team can help the various specialties by taking over the rehabilitation and continuing management of an elderly patient whose main acute illness has been treated by the respective specialist. However, before any of these services can be made available, there is an urgent need to ensure and improve the training of everyone involved in the care of the elderly population. There should be a planned and coordinated approach to develop training of personnel at various levels including the training of the carers.

Emphasis to include geriatrics and gerontology in the curriculum of undergraduate and postgraduate training in medical and nursing colleges should be given. The curriculum should be reviewed and incorporated with modules that stressed on positive attitudes to caring for the elderly. For instance, under the former Certificate of Nursing curriculum, there was very little emphasis on the care of the elderly. It is only in the last few years that the new curriculum for the Diploma in Nursing includes twenty hours of gerontological nursing. Practical experience in
caring for the elderly are obtained from clinical postings to general medical and surgical units, as special geriatric units are not available. Some Colleges of Nursing send their students for clinical experiences to homes for the elderly set up by non-governmental agencies as part of the training programs. These postings can vary from a few hours to a day or two.

The establishment of day care centers, home nursing services and private hospitals that cater only to their needs can further achieve effective delivery of care to the elderly in the community.

Hospital G in Shah Alam is one such private hospital that provides sub-acute aged care services.

This Hospital is situated about 40 kilometers from Kuala Lumpur. It is about one year old and is the first purpose built, free standing, community based, sub-acute hospital with a focus on Aged Care Services in Malaysia. The hospital is licensed under the Private Hospital Act and has a complement of sixty beds. Among the many services provided by this hospital are family consultation, rehabilitation / occupational therapy, age appropriate and life enrichment activities.

The hospital admits elderly patients above the age of fifty-five years who are discharged from acute care hospitals but who still require some medical supervision in transition to returning home (sub – acute care).

It also caters to the older persons and their families who are no longer able to provide the comprehensive “in home” care (assisted living). Other than this, the older persons requiring outpatient treatment prescriptive to their particular needs, and any
individuals requiring rehabilitative therapies may also seek consultation here.

Hospital G has a commitment to work towards improving the skills and performance of each of her client's physical, intellectual, emotional and self-care activities to a level of independence appropriate to age and ability.

The hospital's team of dedicated staff includes resident medical officers, visiting consultant geriatricians, trained registered nurses, occupational, physio and speech therapists, pharmacists and clinical dietitians. The other support staff comprises chefs, administrative, clerical, housekeeping and personal care assistants.

Currently only twenty-two of the sixty beds are available for admissions. In total there are three wards. These wards are staffed by registered nurses assisted by personal care assistants; a Nurse Manager and other support staff. Most of the registered nurses have more than five years of general nursing experience. However, the personal care assistants' experiences are varied.

These Personal Care Assistants are from diverse backgrounds in terms of age, education levels, and skills and knowledge in general nursing. They do not have any formal nurse training and most do not have any experience in caring for the aged. Their role is to assist the Registered Nurses in the delivery of basic nursing care and services to the residents.

There are in total eight trained nurses and ten personal care assistants who cover the wards in three shifts. In every shift, there is always at least one registered nurse with three personal care assistants (PCA).

Although Hospital G is generally staffed with geriatric oriented medical personnel, there remains a critical need to train other staff who contribute to the
holistic care of the elderly, specifically the Personal Care Assistants who assist the registered nurses.

It is of vital importance that trainees at the end of this program are equipped with the right knowledge, skills and attitudes to care for the elderly.

This is because,

When the nursing care is of high quality, the older person receives support not just to recover from an acute episode of illness, but to reshape their lives, to recover and even to improve their mobility (Ford and Heath 1996, p. 1).

Nursing care enables many to face the future with confidence and enjoyment. In addition, many older people have multiple health care needs that can only be met by skilled and experienced nursing which have been proved time and again to be cost – effective. Added to that, as training is an expensive commodity, careful analysis must be carried out to ensure that it is effective.

1.2 STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Caring for the older person is vastly different from caring for the young adult especially when they are sick. Hence, it is of vital importance that these Personal Care Assistants be given the appropriate training. They need to be equipped with the necessary skills, knowledge and attitudes so as to enable them to assist the trained nurses to care for this special aged group effectively, efficiently and safely.

Hospital G is a hospital that aims to provide geriatric dedicated services. Thus, it is of the utmost importance that its staff are well equipped to do so, particularly the
Personal Care Assistants (PCAs).

There have been various studies done in relation to the problems faced, and needs of the elderly both locally and internationally. However, there is no research carried out so far in relation to the curriculum specifically the content and it's relevance in present training programs for elderly care.

1.3 PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of the study is to examine whether the existing training program at this particular private hospital in Shah Alam meets the training needs of the Personal Care Assistants to care for the needs of their elderly residents.

As nursing is about skills and actual “hands on”, it is also important to find out whether the learning environment where the acquisition of skills occurs are conducive, how are the skills taught and assessed.

Specifically, this study aims to investigate whether the content of the existing program is relevant and appropriate for the training of PCAs. In addition, it aims to find out whether teaching methodologies and methods of assessment employed are also relevant and appropriate.

1.4 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This case study sought to answer the following questions:

1. Is the content of the training program relevant?
2 How appropriate are the teaching methodologies used for this program?

3 Are the methods used to assess the total effects of learning relevant and appropriate for this program?

1.5 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

It is hoped that answers obtained from this case study will help enlighten some if not all of the above questions. This case study will give us an insight as to whether the contents cover the objectives set, link the students' entry behavior and helps in the transfer of theory to practice. Corrective actions can subsequently be taken for any shortfalls identified. With this, it is thus; the greatest hope of Hospital G that it's patients will be provided with nothing less than the best nursing care that the elderly deserves.

This study is conducted with the hope that educators/ trainers would be encouraged to revise their training design and methods in line with the needs of their students/ organization. The design of training should always be based on an identified need, as it is a complex activity with many variables and prerequisites.

Often the designer can lose sight of all those variables and the underlying assumptions about what is fixed and what can be changed. Many designers start off with a ready – built model in their heads and just fill in the blanks with specific content. This can lead to a weak design which will not be effective.

( Roscoe, 1992, p. 143)

According to Downs, (1992), in concert with learning, the end product of any training, trainers need to help learners develop better learning skills to enable them to be responsive and adaptable to learning needs. She further stressed that, learning