Is Australia’s adoption of Cultural Safety culturally safe?

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Introduction

Australia is on the verge of introducing yet another policy aimed at improving Indigenous health and well being. Cultural Safety. Yet how culturally safe is Australia’s adoption of Cultural Safety?

The Cultural Safety concept has introduced an original dimension to nursing which New Zealand can offer the world. Australia is in a similar position and has to begin to ask questions. In New Zealand, Cultural Safety’s journey embarked by the Indigenous vision yet, in Australia the movement has been taken up by the dominant culture.

Current literature on Cultural Safety explores the New Zealand experience. There fails to be a body of literature exploring Australia’s adoption of the concept. Yet, we are already using the phrase.

Before Australia adopts a mainstreamed approach to Cultural Safety, a timely opportunity is given to Australia to stop, think and reassess.

Cultural Safety

Cultural Safety relates to the experience of the recipient of nursing service and extends beyond cultural awareness and cultural sensitivity. Nurses delivering the service will have undertaken a process of reflection on their cultural identity and will recognise the impact that his or her personal culture on professional practice.

Unsafe cultural practice comprises any action which diminishes, demeans or disempowers the cultural identity and wellbeing of an individual.

Australia and New Zealand: a Comparison

❖ Australia has the worst health statistics of any colonised country in the world.
❖ Australia was colonised under the legal myth of terra nullius.
❖ The New Zealand Crown signed a legal treaty with the Maori people. Australia has no such treaty.
❖ Australia has rural and remote barriers unparalleled to New Zealand.
❖ By comparison, the Maori are a united and collective race. Australia’s Indigenous people demonstrate great diversity across the country. Thus, questioning the relevance of a national policy.
❖ New Zealand promotes a theme of biculturalism. Australia, multiculturalism.

To say that Cultural Safety is appropriate for Australia on the mere premise that it has been successfully introduced to New Zealand, lumps all Indigenous people together. Allowing Australia to deny and overlook the essence of Aboriginal people, our past and the relevance of previous actions.

Is it appropriate for a national policy of Cultural Safety?

Australia is in a period where the use of shocking people into action, much less evolving an emotion with statistics, has run its course.

❖ Why do we accept the appalling statistics and stories of suffering?

It is not new knowledge that White Australia has a Black history. Yet it continues to remain unacknowledged.

Knowing brings burdens which can be shirked by those living in ignorance. With knowledge the question is no longer what we know, but what we do. That is much harder to deal with.

Recommendations

❖ Examine the purpose of Cultural Safety, whose needs is Australia serving?
❖ Consult and trust the Indigenous reality, using it for the basis of policy and actions. Care must be taken so Indigenous words and experiences are not translated into the dominant world view. Valid knowledge is that of the Indigenous minority in both direction and success and failure of Cultural Safety.
❖ Establish means of effective consultation with the Indigenous minority and the non-Indigenous majority. Make it your responsibility to ensure that this voice is heard.
❖ Broaden Cultural Safety from an attempt to alter personal attitudes, to an effort to redesign social structures.
❖ Make Cultural Safety a Federal issue. The principles of Cultural Safety must be adopted nation wide. Yet, its teachings and content should be adapted to suit the geographical location in Australia.

Conclusion

New Zealand’s Cultural Safety presents Australia with a wonderful, exciting opportunity. Now is the time for Australia to start weaving the threads of Cultural Safety into the fabric of Australian national policies, nursing education and nursing practice.

To those endowed with the power to create and change nursing curricula and policy, ensure that the process by which Australia adopts Cultural Safety is safe.

Chasm Between Knowing and Doing

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How do we do Cultural Safety safely?

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