Improving Patient Outcomes Through Empathy in Nursing

Literature Review and Annotated Bibliography

Literature Review

Empathy, defined as the ability to understand and vicariously share the feelings of another, is increasingly recognized not just as a desirable human quality but as a fundamental and measurable clinical competency in nursing. Its profound impact extends beyond compassionate interactions to directly influence a spectrum of tangible patient outcomes. The modern healthcare paradigm, emphasizing patient-centered care and holistic well-being, necessitates that nurses are not only clinically proficient but also deeply empathetic. This literature review synthesizes insights from fifteen key articles, illuminating the intricate relationships between empathy, nursing practice, nursing education, and their significant effects on patient satisfaction, treatment adherence, psychological well-being, and even physiological recovery. The collective evidence underscores empathy as a cornerstone of quality nursing care, demanding its continuous cultivation through robust educational strategies.

The Indispensable Role of Empathy in Quality Nursing Care

Empathy is consistently identified as an essential element in delivering compassionate and high-quality nursing care. Atanay et al. (2023) highlight that empathy is needed in current nursing actions to improve the quality of nursing services, ultimately leading to patient satisfaction (Atanay et al., 2023). Similarly, Wu (2021) asserts that empathy is a fundamental element for nursing care, establishing positive nurse-patient relationships, and offering favorable nursing care, making it an important clinical indicator for high-quality care (Wu, 2021). This foundational role means that empathy is not

merely a soft skill but a critical professional attribute that underpins the entire care process.

The impact of empathy on patient outcomes is multifaceted, affecting psychological, behavioral, and even physiological dimensions. Al-Suwait et al. (2024), in a systematic review, found that patients who perceived their nurses as empathetic and compassionate reported higher treatment compliance and increased satisfaction across chronic conditions such as diabetes, COPD, and cancer (Al-Suwait, et al., 2024). This directly links nurse empathy to observable patient behaviors and subjective experiences. Similarly, Lee et al. (2018) emphasize that empathy is a crucial clinical competence for nurses that can significantly improve healthcare outcomes, including patient satisfaction, symptom control, and treatment compliance (Lee et al., 2018). These findings demonstrate that empathy is a potent catalyst for patient engagement and adherence to care plans, which are critical for effective disease management.

Beyond behavioral and satisfaction metrics, empathy also profoundly influences patients' psychological and emotional states. Atanay et al. (2023) explicitly identified the reduction of patients' psychological impact as a key outcome of nurse empathy (Atanay et al., 2023). Wu (2021) provides detailed evidence, stating that an empathetic relationship can contribute to improved clinical outcomes such as relief from pain, improved pulse, emotional self-disclosure, enhanced self-concept in elderly patients, and significantly reduced anxiety, depression, and hostility in cancer patients (Wu, 2021). These examples illustrate how empathetic communication can mitigate emotional distress, foster trust, and create a therapeutic environment conducive to healing. Barker et al. (2023), from the patient's perspective, attest to the "positive impact of empathic/compassionate healthcare interactions on peoples' psychological and physiological health outcomes" (Barker et al., 2023). Their review identified communication skills (listening, touch, body language) and helping behaviors as key components of interactions patients deem empathetic, underscoring the behavioral manifestations of empathy as perceived by recipients of care (Barker et al., 2023).

Perhaps the most striking evidence for the profound impact of empathy comes from studies demonstrating its physiological effects. Yang et al. (2018) conducted an empirical study revealing a direct biological link: oncology nurses' empathy was an important factor that helped lung cancer patients

achieve better cellular immunity (Yang et al., 2018). This groundbreaking finding moves beyond psychological or behavioral outcomes to demonstrate a tangible, measurable physiological benefit directly attributable to nurse empathy. Such evidence elevates empathy from a desirable human trait to a critical clinical intervention, capable of directly influencing disease progression and recovery.

Nursing Education as a Catalyst for Empathy Development

Given the profound impact of empathy on patient outcomes, its cultivation within nursing education is not merely beneficial but imperative. Several articles highlight the critical role of educational interventions in fostering and maintaining empathy in future nurses. Engbers (2020), in an integrative review, notes that while empathy is a foundational aspect of caring, healthcare professionals displaying empathy improve patient outcomes (Engbers, 2020). The review synthesizes nursing students' perceptions of interventions designed to cultivate empathy, identifying themes such as understanding the other's experience and informing the nurse's role (Engbers, 2020). This implies that effective empathy education directly contributes to preparing nurses who can positively impact patient outcomes.

However, the literature also acknowledges challenges in empathy development. Adams and Scott (2020) highlight that empathy levels have been shown to decline in nursing students with increased clinical exposure (Adams, Scott 2023). This "empathy enigma" underscores the need for a concentrated and sustained focus on empathy development throughout nursing education. Strategies like integrating humanities content, though not common, can support professional empathy development and maintenance (Adams, Scott 2023).

The efficacy of various educational approaches in enhancing empathy is a recurring theme. Levett-Jones et al. (2024), in a systematic mixed-methods review, assessed the use and effectiveness of arts-based interventions for enhancing empathy skills in healthcare students, including nursing students (Levett-Jones et al., 2024). They found that arts modalities (e.g., visual arts, film, drama, digital stories, literature) generally have a positive effect on empathy levels, especially when combined with active learning and facilitated discussion/reflection (Levett-Jones et al., 2024). This is particularly relevant as empathy is "integral to quality patient care" and its decline in students is a concern (Levett-Jones et al., 2024). These findings suggest that creative and

experiential learning methods can effectively prepare students to establish and maintain the empathic relationships crucial for patient well-being.

Empirical studies further support the role of specific educational programs. Lee et al. (2018) demonstrated the success of a semester-long "situated teaching" program for BSN students that included simulated scenarios and role-play, significantly improving students' empathy performance (Lee et al., 2018). This practical, experiential learning is crucial for developing the skills to bridge abstract concepts with real-world patient interactions. Ibrahim and Ibrahim (2025) explicitly link empathy development in nursing education to "improved ethical decision-making and patient care quality" and "better patient outcomes and more humanized healthcare" (Ibrahim, Ibrahim, 2025). They advocate for integrating emotional intelligence and empathy training to foster ethically aware and emotionally resilient nursing professionals (Ibrahim, Ibrahim, 2025). This highlights a comprehensive approach to education that recognizes the interconnectedness of cognitive, emotional, and ethical competencies for optimal patient care.

Mechanisms and Perceptions: How Empathy Translates into Outcomes

The mechanism through which nurse empathy translates into positive patient outcomes is often rooted in the quality of the nurse-patient relationship and effective communication. Al-Suwait et al. (2024) and Atanay et al. (2023) both emphasize that nurse empathy enhances the therapeutic relationship, leading to improved communication and mutual understanding (Al-Suwait, et al., 2024; Atanay et al., 2023). Empathetic communication enables patients to express their feelings more deeply, allowing nurses to better understand client needs and assist them effectively (Atanay et al., 2023). This active listening and responsiveness, coupled with the ability to bridge technical medical language with a patient's personal experience, are hallmarks of empathetic practice (Campbell, Miller, 2023).

Patient perception is a critical component in this equation. Goodarzi et al. (2015) provided direct empirical evidence that patients' perception of nurse empathy significantly correlates with and predicts their satisfaction (Goodarzi et al., 2015). This underscores that it is not just the nurse's internal empathetic state but its observable manifestation and the patient's recognition of it that drives positive outcomes. Barker et al. (2023) further reinforce this by focusing

exclusively on patients' views, detailing the specific communication skills and "small acts of kindness" that patients consider exemplary of empathic care (Barker et al., 2023). This patient-centric view ensures that educational interventions and practice improvements are aligned with what patients truly value and experience as empathetic care.

Challenges and Future Directions

Despite the compelling evidence, challenges remain in consistently cultivating and measuring empathy, and fully translating educational gains into sustained clinical practice. The complexities of defining and measuring empathy, as noted by various reviews, pose methodological hurdles (Yu, Kirk, 2009; Pira et al., 2025). The need for standardized and validated empathy assessment tools is a recurring recommendation in the literature. Furthermore, the transient nature of empathy enhancement post-intervention in some studies suggests that initial gains from educational programs may not be sustained in real-world clinical environments (Lee et al., 2018; Yu et al., 2021). This calls for interventions that are not only effective but also designed for long-term impact and integration into ongoing professional development.

Future research and educational practices should focus on:

- Longitudinal Studies: Tracking empathy levels and patient outcomes over extended periods to confirm the sustained impact of educational interventions.
- Multi-modal Interventions: Combining diverse strategies such as humanities-based learning, narrative medicine, arts-based approaches, and immersive simulations to create comprehensive empathy curricula (Barker et al., 2023).
- Patient Involvement: Incorporating patient perspectives directly into curriculum development and outcome assessment to ensure relevance and authenticity of empathy education.
- Context-Specific Training: Tailoring empathy education to the unique challenges and emotional demands of different nursing specialties, as exemplified by oncology nursing or chronic disease management (Al-Suwait, et al., 2024; Yang et al., 2018).
- Addressing the "Empathy Enigma": Developing strategies to counter the observed decline in empathy among students during clinical

exposure, potentially by integrating resilience training and reflective practices (Adams, Scott 2023)
- Ethical Decision-Making Integration: Explicitly linking empathy training to ethical decision-making frameworks, as highlighted by Ibrahim and Ibrahim (2025), to prepare nurses for the moral complexities of patient care (Ibrahim, Ibrahim, 2025).

Conclusion

Empathy is undeniably a cornerstone of professional nursing, profoundly influencing a broad spectrum of patient outcomes, from subjective satisfaction and treatment adherence to psychological well-being and even physiological responses. The literature unequivocally demonstrates that when nurses practice with empathy, patients experience improved communication, stronger therapeutic relationships, reduced distress, and tangible health benefits. However, the cultivation of this vital attribute is not incidental; it requires deliberate and continuous effort within nursing education.

The reviewed articles provide strong evidence for the efficacy of various educational interventions, including humanities-based learning, narrative medicine, arts-based programs, and simulation, in fostering empathy among nursing students. These strategies are most impactful when they encourage experiential learning, critical reflection, and emotional engagement, thereby equipping future nurses with the capacity to understand and respond to the complex needs of their patients. As the healthcare landscape continues to evolve, the integration of robust, evidence-based empathy education remains paramount. By prioritizing the development and sustenance of empathy from the classroom to clinical practice, nursing can ensure that it continues to deliver not just technically competent care, but truly humanized, compassionate care that optimizes patient outcomes and upholds the inherent dignity of every individual. This commitment to empathy in nursing education is not merely a pedagogical choice; it is an ethical imperative and a strategic investment in the future of healthcare.

Annotated Bibliography

Adams, S. B., & Scott, L. D. (2023). Humanities-Based Educational Preparation and Empathy in Novice Nurses: Critical Thinking and Analytic Practice. *Nursing Education Perspectives*, 44(1), 46–48. https://doi.org/10.1097/01.NEP.0000000000000892

This study explores the relationship between humanities-based liberal education (HBLE) and empathy in recently graduated nurses. The article emphasizes that empathy is essential for providing patient-centered care, as it improves the nurse-patient relationship, enhances communication, and is associated with improved patient outcomes. The authors highlight that while empathy levels have been shown to decline in nursing students with increased clinical exposure, integrating humanities content can cultivate basic principles of empathy, such as improved humanistic perceptions, caring, and the ability to understand and communicate the patient's perspective. The Jefferson Scale of Empathy used in the study also measures the delivery of compassionate care. Although this pilot study's findings on HBLE's direct link to empathy were not statistically significant, it suggests that integrating humanities content into nursing programs has powerful potential to impact nursing practice decisions and enhance critical thinking, ultimately benefiting patient care.

Al-Suwait, F. R., Aldhafeeri, D. D., , Hameedah Ayadah Al Shammari, Alanazi, A. S. A. R., Aldhafeeri, N. G., Alanazi, R. A. K. (2024). Nurse-Patient Relationship Dynamics: A Systematic Review of Factors Influencing Treatment Compliance and Health Outcomes in Chronic Disease Management. Journal of International Crisis and Risk Communication Research (Print), 7(S11), 871. https://doi.org/10.63278/jicrcr.vi.550

This systematic review synthesized findings on factors influencing the nurse-patient relationship and their impact on patient outcomes, including treatment compliance and health outcomes in chronic conditions. Eight of the included studies specifically investigated the impact of nurse empathy and compassion. The review found that patients who perceived their nurses as empathetic and compassionate reported higher treatment compliance and increased satisfaction with care, across various chronic conditions like diabetes, COPD, and cancer. Qualitative findings further underscored the

importance of nurses' emotional support and understanding in fostering patient engagement and overall well-being. This highlights empathy as a critical element for optimizing the nurse-patient alliance and improving chronic disease management.

Atanay, R. S., Dwidiyanti, M., & Dwiantoro, L. (2023). The Impact of Nurse Empathy in Hospitals Nursing Services. Media Ilmu Kesehatan, 12(3), 305–312.

This systematic review and meta-analysis specifically aimed to determine the impact of empathy on nursing services in hospitals, with a clear focus on patient outcomes. Based on six articles, the review identified three significant impacts of nurse empathy: (1) an increase in the therapeutic relationship between nurse and patient, (2) heightened patient satisfaction, and (3) a reduction in the psychological impact experienced by patients. The authors found that empathy strengthens the nurse-patient relationship through active listening, attentiveness, and understanding emotions, directly contributing to patient satisfaction. The study recommends that hospital nursing management continuously enhance nurses' empathy to improve the quality of nursing care and resolve patients' health issues.

Barker, M.-E., Leach, K. T., & Levett-Jones, T. (2023). Patient's views of empathic and compassionate healthcare interactions: A scoping review. *Nurse Education Today*, 131, Article 105957. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.nedt.2023.105957

This scoping review explored patients' perspectives on healthcare provider behaviors indicative of empathic and compassionate interactions. It highlights that compassion and empathy are crucial for safe and effective patient care and that there is a growing body of evidence supporting the positive impact of empathic interactions on people's psychological and physiological health outcomes. The review identified key behaviors from the patient's viewpoint, including communication skills (listening, touch, body language) and helping behaviors (small acts of kindness that exceed routine care). The findings offer valuable insights for informing the education and training of healthcare providers, including nurses, to ensure that their empathetic behaviors align with patient expectations and positively impact their experiences.

Campbell, L., & Miller, E. (2023). Pedagogies of Rhetorical Empathy-in-Action: Role Playing and Story Sharing in Healthcare Education. **Rhetoric of Health & Medicine, 6(1), 36–63. https://doi.org/10.5744/jpms.2023.6003**

This article analyzes two pedagogical approaches—role-playing with simulated patients in nursing and story sharing in communicative sciences and disorders (CSD)—to understand how empathy-in-action can be taught and learned in healthcare education. It distinguishes empathy from sympathy and compassion, emphasizing that empathy requires responsive reflection from healthcare providers to understand patients' needs and perspectives. The authors argue that successful healthcare relies heavily on a practitioner's ability to empathize with the patient. By integrating rhetorical scholarship with nursing and CSD practices, the study deepens understanding of how empathy contributes to the development of students' professional roles and is foundational to successful rhetoric and communication, ultimately supporting better patient engagement and understanding.

Engbers, R. A. (2020). Students' perceptions of interventions designed to foster empathy: An integrative review. **Nurse Education Today, 86, Article 104325. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.nedt.2019.104325**

This integrative review synthesized undergraduate nursing students' perceptions of interventions designed to cultivate empathy. It asserts that empathy is a foundational aspect of nursing care and highlights that healthcare professionals displaying empathy improve patients' physiological and psychological outcomes, along with patients' subjective assessment of care quality. The review identified five key themes in students' learning about empathy, including understanding the other's experience and informing the nurse's role. The findings suggest that immersive simulations, especially those involving "disorienting dilemmas" followed by guided reflection, were particularly impactful in fostering empathy, thus implicitly connecting effective empathy education to better patient care.

Goodarzi, N., Azma, K., Tavakolian, E., & Peyvand, P. (2015). Association of Nurses' Self-Reported Empathy and Mu Suppression with Patients' Satisfaction. **Journal of Caring Sciences, 4(3), 197–205. https://doi.org/10.15171/jcs.2015.020**

This correlational study investigated the relationship between nurses' self-reported empathy and patient satisfaction. It found a significant positive correlation between the two, indicating that higher levels of nurse empathy were associated with greater patient satisfaction. Specifically, the study revealed that nurses' self-reported empathy could predict 18.5% of the variance in patient satisfaction. The authors concluded that efforts to improve nurses' empathy, such as incorporating empathy skills training into the nursing curriculum, have the potential to enhance patient satisfaction and improve overall treatment outcomes. This provides direct empirical evidence for the quantifiable impact of nurse empathy on patient experience.

Ibrahim, E. K., & Ibrahim, R. H. (2025). The Nexus of Emotional Intelligence, Empathy, and Moral Sensitivity: Enhancing Ethical Nursing Practices in Clinical Settings. Journal of Nursing Management, 2025(1), 9571408. https://doi.org/10.1155/jonm/9571408

This study explores the interrelationships among emotional intelligence, nursing empathy, and moral sensitivity, asserting that interventions promoting these qualities in nursing education and clinical practice can enhance nurses' ethical decision-making and patient care quality. The findings indicate that empathy is a significant predictor of moral sensitivity, and emotional intelligence further amplifies this relationship. The authors conclude that integrating empathy and emotional intelligence training into nursing education is critical for fostering ethically aware and emotionally resilient nurses. Such initiatives are vital for improving nurses' ability to navigate complex patient care scenarios, ultimately leading to better patient outcomes and more humanized healthcare.

Lee, K.-C., Yu, C.-C., Hsieh, P.-L., Li, C., & Chao, Y.-F. C. (2018). Situated teaching improves empathy learning of the students in a BSN program: A quasi-experimental study. Nurse Education Today, 64, 138–143. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.nedt.2018.02.013

This quasi-experimental study evaluated a semester-long situated teaching program designed to increase empathy among undergraduate nursing students in a BSN program. The article emphasizes that empathy is a crucial clinical competence for nurses, capable of improving healthcare outcomes such as patient satisfaction, symptom control, and treatment compliance. The situated teaching program, which integrated education, simulated scenarios, and role-play, significantly enhanced students' empathy performance

compared to a control group. This study provides evidence that specific educational strategies can effectively cultivate empathy in nursing students, directly linking educational interventions to the development of a skill vital for improving various aspects of patient care.

Levett-Jones, T., Brogan, E., Debono, D., Goodhew, M., Govind, N., Pich, J., River, J., Smith, J., Sheppard-Law, S., & Cant, R. (2024). Use and effectiveness of the arts for enhancing healthcare students' empathy skills: A mixed methods systematic review. Nurse Education Today, 138, Article 106185. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.nedt.2024.106185

This systematic mixed-methods review assessed the effectiveness of arts-based interventions in enhancing empathy skills among pre-registration healthcare students, including nursing students. The review emphasizes that empathetic healthcare interactions have a positive impact on people's physical and psychological well-being. It also highlights that empathy is a fundamental component of therapeutic relationships and integral to quality patient care. Arts modalities, especially when combined with active learning and facilitated discussion, were found to generally have a positive effect on empathy levels and foster a nuanced understanding of empathy, thus contributing to students' preparedness for delivering high-quality, empathic patient care.

Pira, G. L., Ruini, C., Vescovelli, F., Baños, R., & Ventura, S. (2025). Could Empathy Be Taught? The Role of Advanced Technologies to Foster Empathy in Medical Students and Healthcare Professionals: A Systematic Review. Journal of Medical Systems, 49(1), Article 6. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10916-025-02144-9

This systematic review by Pira et al. explores the use of digital technologies to foster empathy in healthcare professionals, emphasizing that physician-patient engagement and empathetic responses are pivotal for successful medical treatment. Empathy, encompassing cognitive, affective, and clinical components, is shown to enhance patient satisfaction and therapeutic outcomes by fostering trust, understanding, and active patient engagement in treatment decisions. The review finds that digital technologies, particularly virtual reality (VR) and mobile apps, effectively promote empathy in medical students, demonstrating their potential to improve communication skills and understanding of cultural backgrounds. However, experienced healthcare workers showed less improvement,

suggesting that training approaches need to be tailored to the career stage to effectively cultivate empathy and promote humanistic medical practice.

Wu, Y. (2021). Empathy in nurse-patient interaction: a conversation analysis. BMC Nursing, 20(1), Article 18. https://doi.org/10.1186/s12912-021-00535-0

This qualitative study used conversation analysis to explore how empathy is interactionally achieved in actual nurse-patient conversations. It posits that empathy is a fundamental element for nursing care, crucial for establishing positive nurse-patient relationships and offering favorable nursing care. The study highlights that an empathic relationship between nurses and patients can contribute to improved clinical outcomes, citing examples such as patient relief from pain, improved pulse, emotional self-disclosure, enhanced self-concept in elderly patients, and reduced anxiety, depression, and hostility in cancer patients. These findings provide detailed insights into the communicative processes that underpin empathetic care and its direct benefits for patients.

Yang, N., Xiao, H., Cao, Y., Li, S., Yan, H., & Wang, Y. (2018). Influence of oncology nurses' empathy on lung cancer patients' cellular immunity. *Psychology Research and Behavior Management*, 11, 279–287. https://doi.org/10.2147/PRBM.S168649

This empirical study directly investigated the specific impact of oncology nurses' empathy on the cellular immunity of lung cancer patients. The findings revealed that the nurses' empathy was an important factor that contributed to patients having better immunity. The study explicitly concluded that empathy education, such as narrative medicine, needs to be strengthened to improve patients' outcomes. This article provides a unique and direct biological link between nurse empathy and a tangible physiological patient outcome, underscoring the profound and measurable impact that empathetic nursing care can have beyond psychological well-being or satisfaction.

Yu, J., Parsons, G. S., Lancastle, D., Tonkin, E. T., & Ganesh, S. (2021). "Walking in Their Shoes": The effects of an immersive digital story intervention on empathy in nursing students. Nursing Open, 8(5), 2813–2823. https://doi.org/10.1002/nop2.860

This randomized controlled trial by Yu et al. evaluates an immersive digital story intervention, "Walking in Their Shoes" (WITS), designed to enhance empathy in nursing students. The study highlights that compassionate, dignified, and person-centered care is crucial, especially given past failings in patient care linked to a lack of empathy. Higher empathy in health professionals is associated with improved patient satisfaction, patient compliance, and physiological and psychological health indicators. The WITS intervention produced an immediate, significant increase in empathy in nursing students compared to a lecture alone, reinforcing the potential of immersive digital stories to positively impact student learning and attitudes. However, this improvement was not sustained long-term, suggesting a need for further intervention redesign and reinforcement strategies to ensure lasting benefits for future nursing practice and patient outcomes.

Yu, J., & Kirk, M. (2009). Evaluation of empathy measurement tools in nursing: systematic review. Journal of Advanced Nursing, 65(9), 1790–1806. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1365-2648.2009.05071.x

This systematic review by Yu and Kirk evaluates the rigor of empathy measurement tools in nursing, highlighting empathy's essential role in providing quality and compassionate care. The article notes that higher empathy levels in nurses are often associated with positive patient outcomes, such as reduced distress and anxiety, and an increased likelihood of identifying patient and carer needs. However, inconsistent reported empathy levels and patient outcomes are attributed to the inherent complexity and subjective nature of measuring empathy, as well as methodological issues with the tools themselves. The review concludes that most existing measures are not psychometrically robust or comprehensive enough, underscoring the critical need for user-centered tools that reflect patient perspectives to accurately assess and improve empathy for better patient care.

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