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Sustainable practices in midwifery and nursing: A comprehensive review

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Abstract

This review explores sustainable practices in midwifery and nursing, crucial for promoting environmental health and improving healthcare outcomes. As healthcare professionals increasingly recognize their role in addressing global health challenges, sustainability becomes integral to practice. This paper synthesizes current research on sustainable practices within midwifery and nursing, discussing their impact on environmental, economic, and social sustainability. It also examines barriers to implementing sustainable practices and provides recommendations for overcoming these challenges.

Keywords: Environmental, economic, social sustainability

Introduction

The integration of sustainability into healthcare, encompassing midwifery and nursing practices, represents a crucial evolution in how care is provided, with a focus not only on the well-being of patients but also on the environmental and societal impacts of healthcare services. This detailed introduction will define sustainability in the context of healthcare, explore the importance of its integration, and outline the objectives of this comprehensive review. Sustainability in healthcare refers to the ability to provide high-quality health services and improve health outcomes today without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their health needs. This concept extends beyond environmental aspects, incorporating economic and social dimensions to ensure a holistic approach to health and wellness. In practice, this means adopting practices that reduce environmental footprints, such as minimizing waste and energy consumption, sourcing sustainable materials and supplies, and implementing efficient waste management systems. It also involves considering the social determinants of health and striving for equity in healthcare access and outcomes.

Objectives of the Review

The main objective of this paper is to examine the role of Sustainable Practices in Midwifery and Nursing.

Previous Works

Sustainability and resilience in midwifery emphasize self-determination, self-care, cultivation of professional relationships, and a passion for the profession. However, the concept of resilience might need reconsideration, as it could imply an expectation for midwives to endure challenging workplace environments without adequate support. Sustainable practice calls for a closer examination of the reciprocity between work environments and individual practitioners (Crowther *et al.*, 2016) ^[1].

Implementing and sustaining the Nursing and Midwifery Council (NMC) standards for mentoring in the UK presents challenges, especially regarding the "Sign-off" mentor role. Ensuring mentor competence and creating sustainable frameworks for implementing these standards are essential for the development of nursing and midwifery students (Andrews *et al.*, 2010) ^[2].

A scenario-based learning approach can positively change nursing and midwifery students' attitudes and knowledge towards sustainability and climate change. Embedding sustainability in clinical skills education is both educationally sound and clinically relevant (Richardson *et al.*, 2017) ^[3].

The caseload midwifery group practice model, providing continuity of care in rural settings, has demonstrated sustainable practice through strong leadership, trust, and rigorous application of midwifery principles. This model shows similar clinical outcomes to standard care and highlights the importance of supportive work environments (Haines *et al.*, 2015) [4].

Research capacity building among nurses and midwives is critical for advancing the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in the United States. Strengthening research capacity involves addressing weaknesses in content expertise and ensuring that nursing and midwifery perspectives are included in policy dialogues and global initiatives (Squires, 2019) [5].

Sustainable Practices in Midwifery

Sustainable practices in midwifery are crucial for enhancing environmental stewardship, optimizing resource utilization, and ensuring the health and wellbeing of mothers, newborns, and communities. These practices encompass a broad spectrum of activities, including the adoption of sustainable materials for birthing kits and maternity pads, implementation of energy efficiency measures in birthing centers, water conservation efforts, promotion of non-interventionist birthing practices, and education and advocacy on eco-friendly prenatal, childbirth, and postnatal care.

For instance, switching to reusable or biodegradable materials significantly reduces waste and environmental impact. Energy-saving measures, such as utilizing natural lighting and solar power, alongside installing low-flow fixtures for water conservation, contribute to making maternity care facilities more sustainable. Furthermore, encouraging natural birth processes and minimizing unnecessary medical interventions can reduce the reliance on energy-intensive medical equipment and disposable supplies. Midwives play a pivotal role in educating families about environmentally friendly practices, such as breastfeeding, cloth diapering, and the use of organic baby care products. This advocacy extends to promoting water birth and other natural birthing methods that not only offer potential health benefits but also lessen the environmental footprint compared to conventional birthing methods.

Previous studies shed light on the tangible benefits of these sustainable practices. Research from a Swedish hospital comparing the environmental impact of disposable versus reusable textiles in maternity care revealed that reusable options significantly lowered carbon footprint and waste production. The "Green Birth Initiative" demonstrated that raising awareness among midwives and expectant mothers about sustainable choices led to a decrease in disposable product usage and an uptick in energy-saving practices within birthing centers. Despite the evident advantages, the adoption of sustainable practices in midwifery faces challenges, including initial costs, resistance to change, and the necessity for comprehensive education on sustainability. However, the potential for reduced environmental impacts, cost savings, and enhanced health outcomes presents a compelling case for their integration.

Sustainability in Nursing Education and Practice

Sustainability in nursing education and practice is becoming increasingly important as the healthcare sector seeks to reduce its environmental footprint and contribute to the

global effort to tackle climate change and environmental degradation. Incorporating sustainability into nursing involves educating nurses about environmental health issues, promoting sustainable healthcare practices, and integrating principles of environmental stewardship into all aspects of nursing care.

In nursing education, sustainability can be introduced through curriculum development that includes topics on environmental health, the impact of climate change on public health, and sustainable healthcare practices. This education aims to prepare nurses with the knowledge and skills to implement sustainable practices in their work settings and to advocate for policies that support a sustainable healthcare system. For example, nursing students can learn about the importance of energy conservation, waste reduction, and the use of sustainable materials in healthcare settings. They can also be taught how to conduct environmental health assessments and to consider the environmental impact of healthcare interventions.

In practice, nurses play a key role in promoting sustainability within healthcare facilities. This can involve initiatives to reduce waste, such as implementing recycling programs, reducing the use of single-use plastics, and advocating for the purchase of eco-friendly and sustainably sourced products. Nurses can also contribute to energy conservation efforts by ensuring that unnecessary equipment is turned off when not in use and by participating in the design of energy-efficient healthcare facilities.

Moreover, nurses are in a unique position to advocate for and implement sustainable healthcare practices due to their close interaction with patients and families. They can educate patients about the health benefits of sustainable living practices, such as diet modifications, exercise, and the use of non-toxic products. Additionally, nurses can engage in community outreach activities to promote public health initiatives that focus on environmental sustainability, such as vaccination programs that reduce the need for antibiotic use or community health programs that address social determinants of health in an environmentally sustainable manner.

The integration of sustainability into nursing practice also involves addressing the broader determinants of health, including social, economic, and environmental factors. By adopting a holistic approach to patient care that considers these determinants, nurses can contribute to the development of a healthcare system that is not only environmentally sustainable but also equitable and socially just.

Research and case studies have shown that integrating sustainability into nursing can lead to improved patient outcomes, reduced healthcare costs, and a more motivated and satisfied nursing workforce. However, challenges remain, including the need for more comprehensive education on sustainability in nursing programs, the development of institutional policies that support sustainable practices, and the need for leadership and advocacy to drive change within the healthcare sector.

In summary, sustainability in nursing education and practice is essential for preparing nurses to be effective stewards of environmental health and advocates for sustainable healthcare practices. By incorporating sustainability into their education and practice, nurses can play a crucial role in transforming healthcare to be more environmentally,

economically, and socially sustainable, ultimately contributing to better health outcomes for patients and communities and a healthier planet.

Challenges towards sustainable practices in midwifery and nursing

Implementing and Sustaining New Standards: The introduction of new mentoring standards by the Nursing and Midwifery Council (NMC) in the UK underscores the challenge of maintaining mentor competence and developing frameworks that support, monitor, and provide evidence that regulatory requirements have been met. This includes the creation and sustainability of the 'Sign-off' mentor role, posing challenges for both placement providers and universities (Andrews *et al.*, 2010) ^[2].

Resilience and Sustainability in Practice: The resilience required for sustainable midwifery practice is increasingly researched, yet how to effectively nurture this quality without expecting midwives to 'toughen up' in challenging workplace environments remains a significant challenge. The debate continues on the best ways to support midwives so that they can sustain their practice in socially, economically, and culturally challenging environments (Crowther *et al.*, 2016) ^[1].

Educational Challenges: Developing awareness of sustainability in nursing and midwifery education presents its own set of challenges. While scenario-based learning approaches have shown promise in changing attitudes and knowledge towards sustainability and climate change, integrating these topics into curricula in a way that makes them relevant for clinical practice remains a hurdle. This approach requires innovative educational strategies and the commitment of educational institutions (Richardson *et al.*, 2017) ^[3].

Work-Life Balance in Group Practice Settings

Achieving a sustainable work-life balance for midwives working in group practice settings, especially those involving caseload models with flexible hours and on-call work, is a noted challenge. The need for midwives to actively manage the flexibility of their role with time on call requires organizational, team, and individual strategies. A period of adjustment and the development of effective, sustainable strategies are necessary to manage these challenges.

Legislative and Business-related Barriers: Restrictive legislation and business-related barriers, such as physician supervision restrictions, prescriptive authority, and third-party reimbursement challenges, significantly impact the sustainability of midwifery practice. Addressing these issues requires interdisciplinary and inter organizational legislative and marketing initiatives to promote midwifery as a contemporary, cost-effective practice.

Conclusion

Sustainable practices in midwifery and nursing are crucial for enhancing healthcare outcomes, fostering resilience and job satisfaction among healthcare providers, and addressing the broader goals of environmental sustainability and public health. A comprehensive review of the literature reveals that sustainable practices are multifaceted, encompassing

resilience, educational innovation, mentorship standards, and models of care that support continuity and community engagement. Key to these practices is the emphasis on self-determination, self-care, professional relationships, and a passion for the profession, alongside the critical evaluation of workplace environments and their impact on practitioners' well-being. The integration of sustainability into education and the importance of leadership and support at all levels are also highlighted as essential for the long-term success and fulfillment of the healthcare workforce. Overall, sustainable practices in midwifery and nursing not only contribute to better health outcomes but are also imperative for the profession's evolution and its ability to meet current and future healthcare challenges effectively.

Conflict of Interest

Not available

Financial Support

Not available

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