The Spirituality Integration in Iranian Health Education: Best Lessons for Development

Maryam Mehrabi (MA)1,2, Naderem Memaryan (MD)3, Niloofar Mohaghegh (MA)4, Mahmoud Abbasi (PhD)5

1 Department of Mental Health, Social Health and Addiction, Ministry of Health, Tehran, Iran.
2 Health and Medical Sociology Group, Iran Sociology Association, Iran.
3 Spiritual Health Research Center, School Of Behaviour Sciences and Mental Health, Iran University of Medical Sciences, Tehran, Iran.
4 Faculty of Health Management and Information Sciences, Iran university of Medical Sciences, Tehran, Iran.
5 Medical Ethics and Law Research Center, Shahid Beheshti University of Medical Sciences, Tehran, Iran.

ABSTRACT

Background and Aim: In recent decade, nursing and medical schools increasingly tend to incorporate spirituality education in curriculums. This study was conducted to determine the spiritual education status and the gaps in Iranian nursing and medical schools and identify the best interventional tools to improve.

Materials and Methods: It was performed a descriptive-comparative research by using an advanced search in international and national databases to collect all related materials on spiritual education.

Ethical Considerations: Moral rules such as honesty and integrity in the search, analysis, reporting of the searched literature and citation of the sources were taken into consideration.

Findings: The final sample comprised 48 articles concerning the spirituality integration in nursing and medical education. According to didactic various aspects, the findings subdivided into the associated subjects including; spiritual care education status in nursing and medical schools, educational patterns, interventions evaluation and Iranian studies assessment.

Conclusion: There is a leading gap regarding the spirituality integration in nursing and medical curriculums in Iran, while the religious context and the centralized management of health education in Iran can be considered as appropriate opportunities for this aim. Based on the findings, the development of a structured educational system, sensitizing educational stakeholders and their stimulation by competitive award programs can be considered to a more effective integration of spiritual training in the health curricula.

Introduction

Whereas, since previous decades, the spirituality was being discussed in Iranian medical books1, international scholars have started to show the spirituality impact on patients' health since the 1960s.2 Subsequently, however focusing on the spirituality status in medical and nursing practices3-7 patients and professions express often ignore patients’ spiritual concerns.3

In response to this need, the Association of American Medical Colleges, the World Health Organization and the Joint Commission on Accreditation of Healthcare Organization recommend including spirituality in clinical care and education of health professionals.9 The American Association of Colleges of Nursing also integrated spirituality in standards of nursing practice and in essentials of baccalaureate education.10

In recent years, however all nursing schools in US have integrated spirituality into baccalaureate education, 90% of US medical schools and 59% of British medical schools have some courses or activities on spirituality and health,11 there is only a narrow body literature in Latin America, Asia, Australia and Africa regions12, that illuminate the requirement for the development subject in other cultures.13

In addition, Iranian studies concerning spiritual interventions within Islamic religion-cultural context emphasis on the improvement of spirituality status in health education system.14
The purpose of this study is to discover global best practices and educational methods and analyze gaps of the spiritual education in Iran. The authors also discuss on practical suggestions to integrate the spirituality in nursing and medical curriculums.

Materials and Methods
This study is a descriptive-comparative research by using an advanced search in international and national databases. The study population is topics and syllabus of medical and nursing education. After extracting jargon keywords which had the most frequency, a systematic advanced Boolean function search were performed in "Pubmed, ISI (Web of Knowledge), Scopus, Science Direct", and also on the national base SID (Scientific Information Data base) and Magiran sites. Data were collected according to these search strategies:

Science direct, Scopus
"Education, Medical"[Mesh] OR "Education, Medical, Undergraduate"[Mesh] OR "Education

PubMed

Web of knowledge (ISI)
Results Topic= nurse* OR medical) AND (spiritual*) AND (lesson* OR curriculum
Times span=All years. Databases=SCI-EXPANDED, SSCI, CPCI-S, CPCI-SSH
Results Topic= nurse* OR medical) AND (spiritual*) AND (lesson* OR curriculum
Time span=All years. Databases=SCI-EXPANDED, SSCI, CPCI-S, CPCI-SSH
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Time span=All years. Databases=SCI-EXPANDED, SSCI, CPCI-S, CPCI-SSH

In the first stage, in order to remove duplicate papers and to classify 2200 found papers; data were exported to the End Note X4 program. Then, 1024 remained articles with at least three related keywords were divided into two groups, one related and one semi related. There were only two review articles in 457 related articles and the remaining was original articles to achieve the results, we retrieved full text relevant articles.

Ethical considerations
In this study, moral rules such as honesty and integrity in the search, analysis, reporting of the searched literature and citation of the sources were taken into consideration.

Findings
The final sample is comprised 43 international articles and 5 national studies. They are subdivided according to didactic aspects and subjects at the following categories:
1. Spirituality status education in nursing and medical schools
2. Educational interventions
3. Evaluation of educational interventions
4. Iranian studies on spiritual education

1. Spiritual education status in nursing and medical schools
1.1. Spirituality in medical education
Since 1993, there has been an increasing trend in U.S. medical schools concerning spiritual education into their curricula up to 75% of them.16 In a recent study, 90% of 122 medical schools deans of United States reported have related courses or spirituality contents.17 In 2008, 59% of UK medical schools integrated variously teaching spirituality in their curriculums including the compulsory teaching, the optional program and or in the complementary and alternative medicine.18 In Canada, a survey of 14 psychiatry residency programs illuminated currently most of them offer a minimal instruction including mandatory academic lectures, some degree of elective and case-based supervision.19 Another study in Brazilian medical schools indicates just 10.4% Brazilian medical schools have related courses, and less than half provide some forms of the education.4

1.2. Spirituality in nursing education
While, the comprehensive approaches of nursing theories have aroused nursing schools for noticeable changes in the curriculums20, nursing literature still suffers from the lack of spiritual care concepts.21 While, the contemporary nursing is embracing holism demands to provide nurses’ spiritual care skills22, few textbooks are sporadically included spiritual contents on professional issues, and also the knowledge regarding how it might be effectively achieved is weak.24-26
In sum, the above articles illuminated there is an increasing body of studies which address nursing students’ and nurses’ awareness regarding patients' spiritual needs3,4 and also benefits of spiritual practices on patients' coping and healing.20-23 Within the wave of the professions' tendency to integrate spirituality in curriculums, this trend is obvious progressively in nursing, psychiatric and family medicine residency programs fields.28-33
some specialized clinical units such as cancer care, geriatric psychiatry and geriatric care, pediatrics, and substance abuse clinics are more discussed.30

2. Educational interventions
In this exploratory study, 4 articles on medical education and 4 studies concerning nursing education were identified. The most leading findings are described in the following items and the more details in table 1.

1. In the nursing literature, the Actioning Spirituality and Spiritual Care Education and Training (ASSET) is introduced as a foremost pattern improving spiritual care education. The pattern structure is comprised of three themes; self-awareness, spirituality and spiritual dimensions of nursing and five processes; experiential learning of spirituality, assessment, planning, implementation and evaluation.36 Based on ASSET has been conducted several educational courses such as Baldacchino and the colleagues’ work which implemented three programs for undergraduate nursing students by a combination of various teaching methods.37-39 The positive feedback of these studies sheds light on the importance of teaching spiritual care.

2. The most common methods of traditional teaching including lessons, lectures and seminars, and the new methods to enhance learning introduced self-reflection exercises, case-studies, small group discussions and activities, self-reflection exercises, clinical implications case-studies, and role-playing classroom, field trips and presentation-appraisal.

3. The spiritual assessment is emphasized as a key skill.40-43

4. Providing information concerning the empirical evidence, ongoing researches and effective tools for first-year students reduce students’ dogmatic perceptions over time.42

5. developing spiritual care skills of medical students and professionals can be provided a high-quality care with multicultural context particularly at the end of life.44

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Author</th>
<th>School</th>
<th>Target Group</th>
<th>Educational Interventions</th>
<th>Outcomes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lemmer (2010)</td>
<td>Nursing School - Malta University Malta</td>
<td>Nursing students</td>
<td>One-credit-hour course</td>
<td>Effectiveness on students' and instructor's perceptions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feldstein, et al. (2008)</td>
<td>Medicine School - Stanford University USA</td>
<td>Family medicine clerkships</td>
<td>Develop a curriculum based on a cross-cultural approach to spiritual needs at the end of life</td>
<td>Perceived effectiveness of interventions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baldacchino (2008)</td>
<td>Nursing School - Nottingham University UK</td>
<td>Nursing students</td>
<td>Develop a curriculum based on Model ASSET</td>
<td>Personal, academic and professional positive impacts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sandor et al. (2006)</td>
<td>Medicine School - Texas Medical School USA</td>
<td>First-year students</td>
<td>Informing empirical evidence and ongoing research and tools of spiritual history</td>
<td>Perceived importance of spirituality in practice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chibnall et al. (2002)</td>
<td>Medicine School - Saint Louis University USA</td>
<td>Third-year students</td>
<td>Lectures/ small-group discussion/ physician modeling/ reading vignettes about hypothetical cancer Patients/ administering questionnaire</td>
<td>Sensitizing to psychosocial and spiritual needs of dying patients</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graves et al. (2002)</td>
<td>Medicine School - Kansas City University USA</td>
<td>Third-year students</td>
<td>Small-group activities with focused on skills of history taking / working with hospital chaplaincy</td>
<td>Perceived impacts of spirituality in treatment / utility of chaplains’ work/ teaching ways of intervention</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maddox (2001)</td>
<td>Nursing School Scranton University USA</td>
<td>Nurse practitioner students</td>
<td>Teaching a spiritual assessment tool in a first semester clinical course</td>
<td>Protocols might not be practical in a busy practice setting/ developing an alternative 4-point assessment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shih et al. (2001)</td>
<td>Nursing Schools Northern Taiwan</td>
<td>Students of master degree</td>
<td>Lectures, field trips, clinical implications and presentation appraisal for 18 weeks</td>
<td>Clarifying theoretical concepts/ providing a culturally bonded spiritual care plan and spiritual self-awareness</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

6. In the multidisciplinary plans is educated chaplains’ work and also shared interventional methods such as being a hospital chaplaincy on call.41

Thus, the integrated programs can be included a teaching matrix of contents and activities to address theoretical and practical spiritual subjects by using mentioned various traditional and modern educational tools. Moreover, the most important educational target groups are including trainers, first and second-year students and also intern and residents students.

3. Evaluation of educational interventions

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The most leading evaluation methods of 8 spiritual intervention studies are provided in the following (table 2).


2. Baldacchino (2011) appraised a developed nursing course by a self-administered questionnaire from three cohort groups of learners regarding perceived benefits and the spiritual concepts and their self-awareness.  

3. King et al. (2004) applied the triangulation technique as a powerful method with combination of a videotaped interview, a survey of students' attitudes and a written test on their first examination and the final videotaped interview.  

4. Grabovac et al. (2008) assessed their program by using a pre and post study and a qualitative feedback in six areas including spiritual and professional practice attitudes, transpersonal psychiatry, competency and attitude change for residents and also statistically significant difference between the pre and post session scale. Barnett and Fortin (2006) also appraised their plan by the pre and posttest of workshops with six 5-hour mandatory courses of didactic and case-based modules delivered by interdisciplinary faculty.  

5. As a more reliable evaluation, it is implemented randomized controlled trial method (RCT) by Chung and Eun (2011) among nursing students (47) and Musick et al. (2003) among medical students.  

As a leading finding, it is focused on determining efficacy and effectiveness spiritual intervention by the implementation of a valid method which creating the strong evidence for the development of educational plans. Also, RCT can be considered as the gold standard to appraise educational programs.

### 4. Iranian studies on spiritual education

Among the reviewed literature was discovered only 5 domestic articles which most were within the nursing field. Thus, Our main findings regarding the status of spiritual education in Iran are provided by these basic studies: the spirituality role in nursing care and its implementation, questionnaire of nursing students' competency in offering spiritual care, nursing students' spiritual well-being and their perspectives towards spirituality and spiritual care, development of the Iranian tool to take the spirituality history, and also study spiritual health in medical education program.

<table>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Grabovac, Clark and</td>
<td>Medical School -British Columbia University Canada</td>
<td>Third and fourth-year psychiatry residents</td>
<td>A 6-hour mandatory course/ Teaching sessions consisted of didactic and case-based modules delivered by multidisciplinary faculty</td>
<td>A pre/post study at week 0, week 6, and 6 months follow-up two groups of residents (N=30) and qualitative feedback</td>
<td>Increase of residents' knowledge and skill</td>
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<tr>
<td>McKenna (2008)</td>
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<tr>
<td>King and Crisp (2005)</td>
<td>Medical School USA</td>
<td>Family medicine residencies</td>
<td>Develop specific curriculum (average: 6 hours)</td>
<td>By a randomized survey</td>
<td>Increase of program effectiveness with trained experts</td>
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<tr>
<td>Chung and Eun (2011)</td>
<td>Nursing College Korean</td>
<td>Nursing students</td>
<td>Develop a spiritual care education course (SCEP) based on the ASSET model / 2 hours a week for 6 weeks</td>
<td>An experimental and a control group</td>
<td>Significant differences in improving spirituality, spiritual well-being and spiritual care competence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Barnett and Fortin</td>
<td>- Northeast Medicine School -Yale University USA</td>
<td>Second-year students / Primary care Internal medicine interns and residencies</td>
<td>Lecture, discussion and role-play for taking a spiritual history and knowledge of available pastoral care resource</td>
<td>Pre and post workshop surveys</td>
<td>Increase of students’ competence in related skills / an increase in working with hospital chaplains only by medical students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(2006)</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>King, et al. (2004)</td>
<td>Medical School -South Carolina University USA</td>
<td>First year medical students</td>
<td>Implement a spiritual history-taking curriculum including reading assignments, practice history taking, and standardized patient scenarios with spiritual content</td>
<td>Triangulation</td>
<td>The effective integration of spiritual history into the existing history-taking curriculum in 1st year medical training</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
According to the above studies:
1. Because of the existence of religious-cultural background in Iran society, nursing students have valuable spiritual perception and self-awareness, but their spiritual care skills and knowledge for providing patients' needs are weakness.\textsuperscript{39,51}
2. Spiritual conceptual and practical topics have been neglected in most nursing and medical schools.\textsuperscript{39,51}
3. The spiritual training aims are pursued sporadically by self-interested educators of a few educational units and research departments.\textsuperscript{31}
4. Moreover, the examination of medical and nursing curriculums were clarified the lack of spiritual headlines.\textsuperscript{53}

**Conclusions**
According to reviewed international studies, the majority of them have been carried out in USA, UK and Canada, and only a few has been scattered in Korean, Brazil and Taiwan. These results are confirmed by study’s Lucchetti and Puchalski in medical field.\textsuperscript{31}

However, the nursing literature more has been paid attention to patients' spiritual needs and nurses' issues in providing spiritual care, the serious paucity of spiritual literature and nurses' ambiguity because of overall conceptualizations of the spirituality is discussed, too.\textsuperscript{39} The study of 132 nursing baccalaureate programs in US has clarified only few schools conceptualized the spirituality term.\textsuperscript{44} This issue is also confirmed in the examination of nursing and medical schools curriculums in Iran.\textsuperscript{53}

Thus, since the spirituality concept is mostly addressed as a set of deep-rooted believes from the Judeo-Christian perspective\textsuperscript{23}, providing a synopsis of world religions\textsuperscript{31} and addressing a curriculum based on a cross-cultural approach is recommended. Thus, social norms and cultural beliefs as extrinsic variables can be effective among the health professions students’ and educators’ spiritual approach. It is obvious, while religious societies have more capacity to integrate spirituality in the health education, the growing of secularization phenomenon have slowed down the spirituality integration in the curriculums.\textsuperscript{23}

Thus, the nursing students’ and physicians spiritual self-awareness and personal attitudes to offer spiritual cares have been reported as the predictor variable of requested education level.\textsuperscript{39,51}

However, during recent decades, there is a movement towards integrating spirituality in health as a therapeutic alternative; this movement has not been stimulated effectively in most countries such as Iran yet. It is recommended the spirituality theoretical and practical conceptualization in the conformity with Islamic religious and cultural context and also providing measurable indicators in a precise way. Nevertheless, the effective traditional tools such as lectures, seminars, focused group discussions and workshops are helpful for sensitizing big groups of trainers and learners, the theoretical resources and the practical education should be integrated in curriculums by using a matrix of interactional tools and formal problem-based teachings including reading assignments, practice history taking, and standardized patient scenarios, learning case and on teaching rounds and participation in multidisciplinary team rounds of health professions with clergymen and also implementing appropriate tools to evaluate of interventions in order to extend constructive educational programs.

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**Conflict of interest statement**
The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

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