The 2012 Doris Schwartz Gerontological Nursing Research Award
Ann M. Kolanowski, PhD, RN, FAAN

Dr. Ann Kolanowski, 2012 recipient of the Doris Schwartz Gerontological Nursing Research Award, opened her talk at last year’s Gerontological Society of America meeting by showing a slide of a dew-covered spider web. The title of her presentation, “Behavioral Health in the Nursing Home: Building a Web One Thread at a Time,” definitely caught the attention of the audience. The choice of a spider web as metaphor for a research career is a brilliant one. The primary focus of her talk was illustrating how a complex and detailed program of research is literally like a spider web, put together one linear idea at a time. Dr. Kolanowski illustrated how she built her research trajectory in behavioral health, moving from observational studies to testing interventions. Web strands are flexible and have a certain amount of elasticity. Dr. Kolanowski’s program of research illustrated the need for flexibility to adapt to changes in thinking or in policies. Her work has constantly kept individuals with dementia at the center, building and exploring ways to improve the care they receive. She also demonstrated how her work with her mentors and mentees further developed into a network of nurse researchers all focused on improving the care of individuals with dementia. It is my distinct honor and pleasure to present this spotlight on my mentor and friend, Dr. Ann Kolanowski.

Dr. Kolanowski is a Fellow of the American Academy of Nursing and a Fellow of the Gerontological Society of America. She is currently the Elouise Ross Eberly Professor in the College of Nursing, and Director, Hartford Center of Geriatric Nursing Excellence at The Pennsylvania State University (Penn State); Professor of Psychiatry, College of Medicine at Penn State—Hershey; and Adjunct Professor, Associated Faculty, School of Nursing, University of Pennsy-
vania. She is a senior scientist who has conducted groundbreaking work in exploring nonpharmacological interventions for individuals with dementia.

Although Dr. Kolanowski presented a tongue-in-check slide titled, “How did I get myself into this web?”, her journey and research trajectory were carefully crafted. Dr. Kolanowski’s journey was spurred by a nursing home resident, “Pauline.” Pauline was a behavioral challenge; she wanted to leave the unit and was undeterred by any attempts to keep her in the facility. The staff’s response at the time, which was in the early 1980s, was to restrain Pauline. In Dr. Kolanowski’s eyes, there had to be a better way. She was encouraged to find that better way by obtaining a doctorate at New York University, at the encouragement of her chair, Dr. Laurie Gunter. Dr. Kolanowski worked with Dr. Hoskins at New York University, who also greatly influenced the construction of the behavioral research web.

After obtaining her doctorate, Dr. Kolanowski pursued postdoctoral training at the University of Pennsylvania, where she was mentored by Drs. Lois Evans and Neville Strumpf. At the time of Dr. Kolanowski’s arrival, both Drs. Evans and Strumpf had successfully changed the culture of restraint use in nursing homes through their research efforts. As an example of how many of us are interwoven into the lives and careers of others, often with no realization of how our paths would intersect in the future, I was a nursing assistant in a Philadelphia-area nursing home at the time Drs. Evans and Strumpf were conducting their restraint research. I remember the nurses expressing disbelief about the cessation of restraints and concerns about injuries. At the time, I had no idea that I would eventually work with Drs. Strumpf, Evans, or Kolanowski; nor that I would become one of the fortunate mentee strands in Dr. Kolanowski’s “web.”

After completing her postdoctoral work at the University of Pennsylvania, Dr. Kolanowski moved on to the University of Michigan, where she engaged in a great deal of conceptual work to determine how to reduce the neuropsychiatric symptoms associated with dementia, such as wandering and vocalizations. These neuropsychiatric behaviors, at the time of Dr. Kolanowski’s work at the University of Michigan, were labeled as disruptive, probably because the nursing staff found the behaviors to be disruptive to their routines and expectations of the nursing home environment. Dr. Kolanowski, along with Dr. Donna Algase and others, visualized how the interconnectedness between the physical and social environment of the nursing home, the personality and background factors of the individual with dementia, and the physiological and psychological needs of the individual, could result in some of the neuropsychiatric symptoms of agitation or passivity. This interconnectedness was reflected in the theoretical basis for Dr. Kolanowski’s work, the Need-Driven Dementia-Compromised Behavior Model (Algase et al., 1996). From this model, Dr. Kolanowski and her research team at Penn State have continued to develop and test behavioral interventions designed to reduce and prevent the neuropsychiatric symptoms associated with dementia. They are currently examining how activities can be tailored to the individual with dementia based on the person’s premorbid personality. Dr. Kolanowski’s work is vitally important, especially given the recent mandate from the Centers of Medicare & Medicaid to reduce inappropriate antipsychotic medication use in individuals with dementia.

When I spoke with Dr. Kolanowski about this piece, I asked her how she would best like to be remembered. She responded:

I think what I want to leave as my legacy is the importance of identifying personal interests and preferences that support person-centered care and quality of life for people with dementia—my research demonstrates how use of this information leads to improved behavioral outcomes in the nursing home. I was also fortunate to teach/mentor hundreds of nursing students (undergraduate and graduate) over my career, and many junior faculty, who have enriched my professional life. It is very gratifying to see them go on to improve the care of older adults through their practice, service, and research. They make it possible for me to touch the lives of thousands of older adults!

As one of those mentees, I would like to thank Dr. Kolanowski for her dedication to improving the lives of individuals with dementia, to the nursing profession, and to all of those students and junior faculty who have greatly benefitted from her generosity and patience.

REFERENCE


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