The Skin Challenge
A Practical Approach for Teaching Skin Assessment and Documentation Skills

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The skin is the largest human organ, the most visible, yet the most difficult to describe. Students and experienced nurses alike find it difficult to come up with the right words to describe both normal and abnormal skin assessment findings. Many times the documentation of skin assessment is vague, or communicated in a way that other nurses cannot visualize the findings. The Skin Challenge exercise is designed to address this problem and help students learn about documentation.

For our first semester baccalaureate nursing students, learning to chart is of equal importance to learning how to assess and describe problems related to the skin. The paucity of literature on how to teach nursing students about documentation, as described by Sorrell,1 persists. While documentation guidelines are found in most nursing fundamentals textbooks, there is little to help instructors teach students the skills required to meet those guidelines.

The Skin Challenge exercise is designed to address these two problems. The exercise lets students demonstrate their new knowledge about skin assessment, and document their findings with confidence and accuracy. The exercise provides a way for instructors to help students learn to organize and present relevant data about a specific problem.

To complete the exercise, students are given a full color picture of a skin lesion. The pictured lesions vary in size, shape, and color. Some of the pictures have a single lesion, others have multiple shapes and sizes. The pictures include lesions that may be found on all body areas, including the tongue and the mucous membranes. These examples reinforce our teaching that all areas are included in a skin assessment. The pictures are cut out of various healthcare journals. When given their photo, students laughed and joked about their pictures, turning them upside down or sideways, and tried to barter and swap them “for something less disgusting.”

The objective of the assignment is to have the student critically assess the lesion in the photo, and apply the following template to document his or her description.

- What is the
  1. location?
  2. color?
  3. size?
  4. shape?
  5. distribution?
  6. exudate? (or not?)
  7. type? (eg, macule, papule, vesicle, bulla, etc)

Although physical assessment textbook guidelines for skin assessment may vary slightly, the templates are similar and provide a common basic language used in skin assessment and documentation.2,5

Documentation in the Skin Challenge is to be handwritten, not typed. This simulates the experience of creating a real chart note. The students are encouraged to practice the documentation several times on a scrap piece of paper before handing in their final work. Most students report six revisions. As would be expected, most students reported rewriting the content several times before feeling confident that they had the correct wording. The students are encouraged to be concise and to choose words that would help the next nurse visualize the skin problem. Limited space is given on the assignment paper to keep wordiness in check (Figure 1).

Students are given 2 weeks to complete the assignment. They are encouraged to model collegiality and seek the benefits of a second student opinion. Sharing knowledge between peers is encouraged, to model this aspect of professional behavior.

The grading rubric for the Skin Challenge involves assigning 2, 1, or 0 points. The scoring is based on completion of the 7-item template and other aspects of correct documentation, for example, date, time, signature. The overwhelming majority of students receive full points on the assignment.

Student feedback on the assignment has been positive. Many students said that they would like to see a similar practice with physical assessment of other body systems.
This assignment has had several positive outcomes. While enjoying the assignment, students learn the basics of skin assessment and have an important early success in documentation. As a new assignment, the results have been excellent and we highly recommend the Skin Challenge to others.

References