Critical Care Nurses Perspectives Towards End of Life Care in the Intensive Care Unit: A Qualitative Exploration of Nursing Staff

The Problem:
Lives are saved in intensive care units (ICUs) around the country. Lives are also lost. Nationally, it is estimated that 1 in every 5 ICU patients will die while still in the care of ICU nurses (Angus et al., 2004). The literature has demonstrated that working in an environment where extraordinary measures are taken to preserve life changes the experience of nurses caring for dying patients and their families. There are a limited number of studies that address the experiences of those nurses.

Specific Aims:
1. What is the experience of today’s critical care nurse in the provision of end-of-life care?
2. What are the issues surrounding end-of-life care in the ICU?
3. What would help facilitate end-of-life care?

Survey
247 surveys were completed. The results were analyzed for descriptive statistics by the online survey generator SurveyMonkey.com and the researcher.

Core Theme: Care of the Dying Family

External
Perceptions

Family
“The sudden nature of death is much, much more difficult for families to accept.”  
Informant 2

Profession
“When you’re providing end of life care for the patient, most of what you’re doing is taking care of the family….”  
Informant 6

“…” I learned through the experience of actually having a dying patient.”  
Informant 4

Nurse Presence
Comfort/Support
“You really need to be comfortable before you can help somebody else through it…”  
Informant 5

“…” you’re only worried about the living at this point, we make sure the living is comfortable.”  
Informant 1

Education
“…” giving them the best information you can so that they have all the pieces of the information to make the best possible decision they can.”  
Informant 4

“…” explaining the rights and sounds of death that doesn’t necessarily mean the patient’s suffering.”  
Informant 1

Coordination
“…” the nurse, she had to push that… get social work involved, get the docs on board… she had to drive that process.”  
Informant 6

Internal
Experiential Learning

Nurse
Emotional
“I wanted to give them something good, and I gradually learned that it isn’t “…” I learned through the experience of actually having a dying patient.”  
Informant 5

Physical
“I learned to care for a dying person right, right in the ICU.”  
Informant 2

Family
“I learned the experience of actually having a dying patient.”  
Informant 4

Conflict

Cite Rates

Implications for Practice

• Support of nurses dealing with personal conflict as well as family conflict.
• Development and validation of a survey tool which helps nurses quantitatively explore their experiences as well as explain specific circumstances which will help ICU nurses facilitate optimal end of life care within the ICU.
• Short, semi-structured interviews were compatible with busy ICU nurses; however, multiple short follow up interviews would allow further exploration of themes identified by staff.

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References

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The Intensive Care Unit provides focused, complex, and advanced medical care to patients ages 18 and older.

Qualitative vs. Quantitative:

- Qualitative research methods discover the significance of the data through the process and meanings found in language, concepts, and words.
- Quantitative research methods involve the measurement and analysis of relationships between variables which can be captured objectively.

Survey

The pie-chart to the right displays the answer to a survey question which asked the nurse to recall if the last dying patient she or he had was admitted with advanced directives.

Nurses expressed frustration in answering survey questions which asked them to rate their patient’s experience during end of life care. Part of the difficulty was due to the unique circumstances surrounding individual patient’s death. Another challenge was assessing unconscious patients.

Below is an example of a survey question:

*Rate your experience with providing support to the family after death has occurred:*  
1. Worst Experience 2. 3. 4. 5. 6. 7. 8. 9. 10. Best Experience