

THE EXPERIENCE OF REGISTERED NURSES EMPLOYED IN ACUTE CARE HOSPITALS: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY

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Purpose and Significance:

The specific aim of this study is to explore the experience of registered nurses (RNs) practicing in contemporary acute care hospitals. There is abundant quantitative research on elements such as job satisfaction and perceived stress. Likewise, there is quantitative research measuring the impact of staffing characteristics on patient outcomes. After a decade of restructuring, reorganization, and redesign, the literature notes that RN roles and responsibilities have changed. However, many studies addressing the outcomes of these organizational processes focus on biomedical tasks, productivity, and cost per patient day. There are published reports of the current nursing shortage, increasing intention to leave the profession, and the decline in the quality of patient care. What professional nurses actually do in hospitals remains unexposed. There is a lack of studies on areas of concern from the perspective of RNs living the experience. This study explores the reality of practice and reflects issues of relevance to RNs in contemporary hospitals.

Method:

The purposeful sample of 35 RNs employed in acute care hospitals in Southeast Tennessee included equal representation of medical-surgical, Emergency department, and Intensive Care Unit nurses. The descriptive phenomenological study was conducted in the Husserlian methodological tradition as interpreted by Pollio, Henley, and Thompson (1997). Interviews were individual, in-depth, and non-directive. Interviewers asked participants to “tell me about a time you provided nursing care to a patient.” Analysis of the transcribed interviews included identification of themes by an interdisciplinary phenomenology research group.

Findings and Discussion

Nurses have stories that they need to tell. Transcripts are permeated with a sense of “unfinished business” and a residue of moral distress. The nurses spoke of meeting the needs of their patients and families while coping with their own distress related to horrifying injuries and inexplicable events. The experience of time varied from one specialty area to another, as did the depth of knowledge the participants identified as necessary to provide care. Many stories involved descriptions of relationships with other people: nurses as a team, working with physicians, and dealing with families. Educators can use the information from this study to shape curriculum and plan clinical experiences while preparing their students for the reality of nursing practice in contemporary acute care hospitals.