

Using a Phenomenological Approach to Explore the Experiences of Nursing Students in Coping with Their Emotional Responses in Caring for End-Of-Life Patients

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Abstract : Background: End-of-life care is a large area of all nursing practice and student nurses are likely to meet dying patients in many placement areas. It is therefore important to understand the emotional responses and coping strategies of student nurses in order for nursing education systems to have some appreciation of how nursing students might be supported in the future. Methodology: This research used a qualitative phenomenological approach. Six student nurses undertaking a degree-level adult nursing course were interviewed. Their responses to questions were analyzed using interpretative phenomenological analysis. Finding: The findings identified 3 main themes. First, the common experience of 'unpreparedness'. A very small number of participants felt that this was unavoidable and that 'no preparation is possible', the majority felt that they were unprepared because of 'insufficient input' from the university and as a result of wider 'social taboos' around death and dying. The second theme showed that emotions were affected by 'the personal connection to the patient' and the important sub-themes of 'the evoking of memories', 'involvement in care' and 'sense of responsibility'. The third theme, the coping strategies used by students, seemed to fall into two broad areas those 'internal' with the student and those 'external'. In terms of the internal coping strategies, 'detachment', 'faith', 'rationalization' and 'reflective skills' are the important components of this part. Regarding the external coping strategies, 'clinical staff' and 'the importance of family and friends' are the importance of accessing external forms of support. Implication: It is clear that student nurses are affected emotionally by caring for dying patients and many of them have apprehension even before they begin on their placements but very often this is unspoken. Those anxieties before the placement become more pronounced during and continue after the placements. This has implications for when support is offered and possibly its duration. Another significant point of the study is that participants often highlighted their wish to speak to qualified nurses after their experiences of being involved in end-of-life care and especially when they had been present at the time of death. Many of the students spoke that qualified nurses were not available to them. This seemed to be due to a number of reasons. Because the qualified nurses were not available, students had to make use of family members and friends to talk to. Consequently, the implication of this study is not only to educate student nurses but also to educate the qualified mentors on the importance of providing emotional support to students.

Keywords : nursing students, coping strategies, end-of-life care, emotional responses

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