Nurses’ Experiences Caring for Patients and Families During the COVID-19 Pandemic: Communication Challenges

Christine A. Pariseault PhD, RN, CEN
Linda Carman Copel PhD, RN, PMHCNS, BC, CNE, ANEF, NCC, FAPA
Michelle A. McKay PhD, RN, CCRN

Introduction
The COVID-19 pandemic impacts the delivery of healthcare, specifically care delivered to patients and families, during a state of social distancing and isolation. Hospital policies halting family visitation affected the experiences of nurses managing the care of patients isolated from family and support persons.

Purpose
To gain an understanding of the perceptions and experiences of nurses caring for patients and families during a state of social isolation as experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Methods
- Qualitative descriptive
- Recruited via social media
- N = 17
- Thematic Analysis

Inclusion Criteria
- Registered Nurse
- Practiced during the COVID-19 Pandemic

Results

Theme 1: Communication Challenges
- Used iPhones and iPads to connect with families
- Families desired for extended calls/videos to be present in room virtually
- Challenges related to use of technology for older population

Theme 2: Barriers to Communication
- PPE barrier
- Physical layout of hospital rooms and closed doors
- Identification of primary family member contact
- Language/hearing/cultural barriers

Theme 3: Prioritization
- Need to prioritize care along with communication needs
- Guilt related to time not spent with patient
- Constant need for reassessment and reevaluation about patient and family priorities

Theme 4: Integration of Group Communication
- Nurses brought interdisciplinary team together to communicate with families and patient
- Value in designated times for group communication
- Nurses accepted responsibility to initiate group communication

Theme 5: Self-Reflection
- How to effectively provide a compassionate environment for the patient under current policies
- Nurses felt concern about new barriers to nurse-patient connection related to lack of visitation, PPE, isolation policies
- Internal strife while balancing visitation restrictions with compassionate care

Theme 6: Acceptance of Gratitude
- Appreciation from families & patients served as a motivator
- Feeling gratitude served as an incentive to keep working during pandemic restrictions

Implications
- This study brings awareness to the importance of nurse communication with patients and families during the time of restricted visitation policies.
- Results highlight the innovative ways that nurses included families while comforting patients who were sick, alone, and at the end of life, and the ways nurses facilitated emotional connections between patients and families.
- Nurses cultivated sensitivity to self and others while using problem solving skills to develop relationships with patients and families.
- Nurses experienced a sense of being authentically present during patient care while intertwining the humanistic aspects of nursing with technology.

Conclusions
- Nurses prioritized communication with and between patients and families after extreme changes in hospital visitation policies.
- Nurses served as a vital link to connecting the health care team with families using technology.
- Technology played a strong role in connecting patients with families.
- Although changes in communication added to nursing workload, nurses worked hard to provide compassionate care during a time where patients were stressed and without their usual support system.
- Technology and designated communication times could provide improved communication plans in the future.