

# THE PROCESS OF ACQUIRING PRACTICAL KNOWLEDGE BY EMERGENCY NURSING PROFESSIONALS IN TAIWAN: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY

**Authors:** Wen Chu, MS, RN, and Li-Ling Hsu, EdD, RN, Taipei, Taiwan

**Introduction:** The emergency department is the front line in the hospital battlefield. Medical staff are frequently tested with highly complex and fast-changing clinical situations. Nurses must acquire practical knowledge in a fast-changing environment in order to provide the most appropriate form of nursing care. This study explores the process of the development of practical knowledge in emergency nurses.

**Method:** This study uses a phenomenological approach and in-depth interviews and adopts Moustakas data analysis techniques. In 2007, the researcher interviewed 10 professional nurses with at least 3 years of ED experience and collected 13 interview transcripts.

**Results:** Data analysis identified 4 major themes and 10 sub themes in the process of development of practical knowledge for ED nurses. The 4 major stages in the learning process are (1) matter-of-course apprenticeship, (2) stimulus-response

learning, (3) work demand-oriented learning, and (4) self-reflective learning.

**Discussion:** Upon entering the emergency department, nurses began learning by serving as apprentices to seniors. After this, they experienced the stimulus-response learning phase as they responded to stimuli in the form of pressure to grow and learn. As they gradually drifted away from the protection of seniors, they continued to learn in order to meet work demands, hold on to their jobs, and maintain a proper level of professional competence. A small number of participants entered the final stage of self-reflective learning, in which they examined their life experience by self-reflection and developed a proper nursing attitude and knowledge about holistic patient care.

**Key words:** Learning process; Phenomenology; Emergency nursing professionals

The emergency department is the front line in the hospital battlefield. It is a special environment in which to work, as health care staff are frequently tested with highly complex, fast-changing, and dangerous clinical situations that require rapid decisions.<sup>1-3</sup> Learning has been described as the cognitive processing of special rules. One famous classification is Ryle's distinction between knowing that (theoretical knowledge) and know-

ing how (practical knowledge).<sup>4</sup> "Knowing that" is about facts and causal relationships. "Knowing how" is about skills and the practical ability to actually do something or perform a sequence of actions, like giving an injection or performing cardiac surgery. Nurses need to possess sufficient knowledge to excel in a fast-changing work environment, conduct swift and accurate evaluations of patients, provide assistance in emergency treatment, and offer the most appropriate form of nursing treatment. It is imperative for ED nurses to possess a sufficient level of practical knowledge and professional expertise to provide quality care for patients. The experience of knowing for emergency nurses is a component of clinical practice.<sup>5</sup> Because studies on clinical/practical nursing knowledge are rare, this study focuses on understanding how ED nurses acquire practical knowledge.

Wen Chu is Supervisor, Department of Nursing, Cardinal Tien Hospital, Taipei, Taiwan.

Li-Ling Hsu is Associate Professor, Department of Nursing, and Director of Graduate Institute of Allied Health Education, National Taipei College of Nursing, Taipei, Taiwan.

For correspondence, write: Li-Ling Hsu, EdD, RN, No. 365, Ming-Te Rd., Peitou, Taipei, Taiwan 11219; E-mail: [llhsu@ntcn.edu.tw](mailto:llhsu@ntcn.edu.tw).

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## Methods

This study adopted a qualitative, phenomenological approach to data collection and qualitative analysis. The

researcher conducted in-depth interviews in which participants were asked to share their learning process by discussing their learning experiences since working in the emergency department, obstacles to learning and how they overcome them, their own learning techniques, and the most baffling or memorable experience in taking care of patients, in order to construct an in-depth view of the phenomenological nature of their learning experience.

**PARTICIPANTS**

The participants, who were using purposive sampling, included professional nurses with at least 3 years of ED experience at a medical center or a regional hospital in northern Taiwan. Participants had to meet the selection criteria of having at least 3 years of emergency specialist experience domestically or abroad (this is one of the entry requirements for Certification for Emergency and Critical Care Nursing as stipulated by the Taiwan Nurses Association). Participants secured the approval of the hospital's teaching and research development panel and the recommendation of directors to participate in the research. The researcher personally invited eligible nurses to participate. Directors of eligible participants were given a briefing by the researcher about this project. Prior to the interview, participants were informed by the researcher in person or over the telephone of details including research objective, data collection, confidentiality, and privileges and obligations, and they were required to sign an informed consent form. Data were collected from May to October, 2007. Ten professional nurses were invited to interview sessions that lasted 40 to 60 minutes each. Their average professional ED experience was 6.3 years, and their average age was 29 years.

**SETTING**

This study was carried out in a medical center and a regional teaching hospital in Taiwan.

**DATA ANALYSIS**

Data analysis was conducted based on the following steps suggested by Moustakas.<sup>6</sup> The interviews were recorded and the transcripts from the interviews were then analyzed for statements about the participants' experiences with the process of acquiring knowledge. These statements then were collated to develop non-repetitive, non-overlapping lists.<sup>7</sup> Moustakas<sup>6</sup> defines this process as "Epoche" in phenomenology. This refers to the researchers' self-reflections to identify and set aside biases, presuppositions, or prejudices related to the concept of the process of acquiring knowledge. These statements then were grouped into units with a textual description of the experience for each unit.<sup>7</sup>

**TABLE 1**  
**The process for the development of practical knowledge for ED nurses**

<b>Learning process</b>	<b>Steps</b>
Matter-of-course apprenticeship	Task-oriented learning Disease-oriented learning Uncertainty response learning
Stimulation-response learning	Passive literature research Learn from the behavior of others Build up experience from practice
Work demand-oriented learning	Medical specialty development Self-monitored learning
Self-reflective learning	Learn by comparison Learn by self-reflection

The idea was to grasp the experience of participants, capture the themes and meanings of the experiences, and describe them in words.

The next step in the research process was that of Imaginative Variation. The aim was to arrive at a structural description of an experience and the underlying and precipitating factors that accounted for what was being experienced; in other words, the "how" that speaks to conditions that illuminate the "what" of experience. The final step in the phenomenological research process was the intuitive integration of the fundamental textural and structural descriptions into a unified statement of the essence of the experience of the phenomenon as a whole.

Trustworthiness of the research was ensured by being true to the principles of phenomenological inquiry and the use of criteria developed to assess qualitative research.<sup>8</sup>

**ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS**

The following measures were taken to ensure the security and privacy of participants:

**Confidentiality:** Interviews were conducted on a one-on-one basis. Participants were assured that their statements would be treated as strictly confidential.

**Protection:** The researcher eliminated statements containing personal information or potentially dangerous information in order to protect the participants.

**Respect:** All participants were informed of the research objectives and procedure and were required to sign written consent prior to the interview. In addition, participants were told that

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