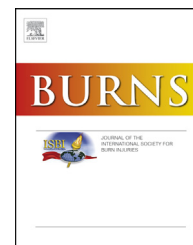


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Review

Rigorous, robust and systematic: Qualitative research and its contribution to burn care. An integrative review

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ABSTRACT

Qualitative methods are progressively being implemented by researchers for exploration within healthcare. However, there has been a longstanding and wide-ranging debate concerning the relative merits of qualitative research within the health care literature. This integrative review aimed to exam the contribution of qualitative research in burns care and subsequent rehabilitation. Studies were identified using an electronic search strategy using the databases PubMed, Cumulative Index of Nursing and Allied Health Literature (CINAHL), Excerpta Medica database (EMBASE) and Scopus of peer reviewed primary research in English between 2009 to April 2014 using Whittemore and Knafli's integrative review method as a guide for analysis. From the 298 papers identified, 26 research papers met the inclusion criteria. Across all studies there was an average of 22 participants involved in each study with a range of 6–53 participants conducted across 12 nations that focussed on burns prevention, paediatric burns, appropriate acquisition and delivery of burns care, pain and psychosocial implications of burns trauma. Careful and rigorous application of qualitative methodologies promotes and enriches the development of burns knowledge. In particular, the key elements in qualitative methodological process and its publication are critical in disseminating credible and methodologically sound qualitative research.

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Contents

1. Introduction	000
2. Methods	000
2.1. Review process	000
2.2. Literature search	000
2.3. Inclusion criteria	000
2.4. Data extraction	000
2.5. Data synthesis	000
2.6. Data reduction	000
3. Results	000
3.1. In which domains has qualitative research been used in burns research?	000
3.2. Why has qualitative research been used in burns research?	000
3.3. How has qualitative research been used in burns research?	000
3.4. How and where has qualitative research in burns been reported in the literature?	000
4. Discussion	000
4.1. Criteria for evaluation	000
4.2. Limitations and strength of evidence	000
5. Conclusion	000
References	000

1. Introduction

Qualitative methods are progressively being implemented by researchers to explore aspects of healthcare that are untapped by quantitative methodologies [1]. Researchers have been utilising qualitative research methodologies since the 1960s [2]. However, there has been a longstanding and wide-ranging debate concerning the relative merits of qualitative research within the health care literature [3]. Despite qualitative research becoming more prominent in medicine and health-care literature, it is a commonly held belief that qualitative research can only address limited research questions and therefore merely complement empirical approaches [4,5]. This may be due to researchers being well versed in quantitative research and unfamiliar with qualitative research and its central tenets. Therefore it is essential to convey that the unique position of the qualitative researcher is to ‘understand, explain, and demystify social reality through the eyes of different participants’ [6]. Quantitative research is objective in its approach and therefore aims to provide an overarching and often linear and normographic explanation rather than develop a deeper ideographic and complex understanding. Dingwall et al. [7] argue that qualitative research has a fundamental role in:

addressing the gap between the findings of [randomised controlled trials] . . . and the practice of decision-making in individual cases with individual patients. The more individualised an intervention becomes, the greater the role that qualitative work is likely to play in its evaluation.

Qualitative research has come under intense scrutiny and, at times, received harsh criticism from those in the medical profession [8]. Primarily utilised by those in nursing and the social sciences, qualitative research is a broad term for a diversity of methodological approaches. Qualitative methodologies allow the researcher to: challenge assumptions about

health and illness; contribute to the development of theory for practice; offer a way to change how issues are conceptualised and enable one to see the world from another’s point of view that focuses on meaning, interpretation and understanding. Creswell [9] states that:

‘Qualitative research is an inquiry process of understanding based on distinct methodological traditions of inquiry that explore a social or human problem. The researcher builds a complex, holistic picture, analyses words, reports detailed views of informants, and conducts the study in a natural setting.’

The proliferation of qualitative research over the past decades has advanced health science, in particular nursing and the social sciences, contributing to the collective understanding of the experiences of health and illness. In recent years, qualitative research has gained considerable momentum with a noticeable shift towards the use of qualitative research methodologies that is evident in the number of qualitative peer reviewed publications globally. This trend is clearly noted over the last decade within the burns literature. A scoping search of burns research found that since 1998, there have been less than 100 published qualitative peer reviewed research papers exploring burn injury however over 40 of these have been published since 2009 alone. Among them, phenomenology, ethnography, grounded-theory, social constructionism and action research were methodologies utilised to explore and emphasise critical issues in burn care. Consequently, the utility of qualitative research as a rigorous, robust and systematic approach for health professionals investigating burns trauma warrants further exploration. Increasing complexity in burn care, combined with the rising trajectory of qualitative methodologies in burns research, supports the need for a current examination of the contribution to qualitative research in burns care and rehabilitation. Therefore, the aim of this study is to critically appraise the use of qualitative research in the field of burn management and rehabilitation.

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