



## Registered nurses' perceptions of their professional work in nursing homes and home-based care: A focus group study



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### ARTICLE INFO

#### Article history:

Received 19 April 2013

Received in revised form 1 October 2013

Accepted 2 October 2013

#### Keywords:

Elderly care

Focus groups

Long term relationship

Professional work

Registered nurses

### ABSTRACT

**Background:** In Sweden, as well as in most industrialised countries, an increasing older population is expected to create a growing demand for health care staff. Previous studies have pointed to lack of proficient medical and nursing staff specialised in geriatric care, which poses serious threats to the care of a vulnerable population. At the same time, there are studies describing elderly care as a low-status career choice, attracting neither nurses nor student nurses. Judging from previous research it was deemed important to explore how nurses in elderly care perceive their work, thus possibly provide vital knowledge that can guide nurse educators and unit managers as a means to promote a career in elderly care.

**Objective:** The aim of the present study was to illuminate how nurses, working in nursing homes and home-based care, perceived their professional work.

**Method:** This was a qualitative study using focus groups. 30 registered nurses in seven focus groups were interviewed. The participants worked in nursing homes and home-based care for the elderly in rural areas and in a larger city in southern Sweden. The interviews were analysed in line with the tradition of naturalistic inquiry.

**Results:** Our findings illustrate how nurses working in elderly care perceived their professional work as holistic and respectful nursing. Three categories of professional work emerged during analysis: (1) establishing long-term relationships, (2) nursing beyond technical skills, and (3) balancing independence and a sense of loneliness.

**Conclusions:** The findings are important as they represent positive alternatives to the somewhat prevailing view on elderly care as depressing and undemanding. Nurse educators might use the key aspects as good examples, thus influencing student nurses' attitudes towards elderly care in a positive way. Elderly care agencies might find them helpful when recruiting and retaining nurses to a much needed area.

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### What is already known about the topic?

- Previous research has described elderly care as undemanding and depressing, not usually considered as a career choice by student nurses and newly graduated nurses.
- Job satisfaction is a strong predictor for nurse recruitment and retention.

- Professional identity can be conceptualised in terms of what it means to be and act as a nurse in everyday nursing practice.

### What this paper adds

- Professional work in elderly care is complex, requiring advanced nursing skills and several years of previous experience in acute-care settings.
- Three key aspects of registered nurses' perception of their professional work emerged: establishing long-term relationships, nursing beyond technical skills, and

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balancing independence with a sense of loneliness, indicating a strong professional identity.

- The findings provide nurse educators and unit managers with positive examples when attracting and recruiting to an area in need of qualified and engaged registered nurses.

## 1. Introduction

In Sweden, as well as in most industrialised countries, an ageing population is expected to create a growing demand for health care staff, in particular specialist nurses in geriatric care. It is not unusual that high age is followed by the risk to develop a number of different chronic diseases leading to an increased group of patients with long-term caring needs. Hence, it is most likely that a major part of nursing and medical care for this population will be redirected from hospitals to home-health care teams or assisted living, intensifying the need for highly qualified geriatric care. It is therefore alarming when student nurses and newly graduated nurses describe elderly care as boring, undemanding and depressing, and not an option for a future career (Kloster et al., 2007; Stevens, 2011). The reported findings are in part contradicted by findings in a recent study by Carlson (2013). Student nurses valued the independent and person-centred nature of nursing they had experienced during clinical placements in elderly care. This was put forward by the students as a reason to consider a career in elderly care. On the other hand, some students described elderly care as hopeless in a stressful and depressing work environment, and explained that elderly care was not a career choice they would consider after graduation. In Sweden, recent reports (Statistics Sweden, 2011; National Board of Health and Welfare, 2012) point to the risk that lack of proficient medical and nursing staff specialised in geriatric care and gerontology poses serious threats to care and patient safety for a vulnerable population. Adding to this picture is the anticipated worldwide shortage of health and social care staff (WHO, 2006). Conclusively, with the current global demographic change, an increased demand for nurses working in geriatric care will be imminent.

### 1.1. Job satisfaction

Job satisfaction, including intrinsic factors such as: autonomy, freedom to use personal knowledge and judgement, and relationships with patients, as well as extrinsic factors i.e. working conditions, benefits and salaries, is a strong predictor for nurse retention (Ellenbecker, 2004; Karsh et al., 2005). Vlachos (2012) reported that continuous relationships with patients and families, and being able to make a difference were rewarding components significant for positive job satisfaction in nursing homes. On a similar note, Prentice and Black (2007) concluded that sufficient resources allowing nurses to care for, and make a difference to the residents' lives were important factors for nurse retention. In a survey by Ellenbecker (2001), professional autonomy, relationships with peers and patients and sensing that the work is important and worthwhile were indicators positively

related to job satisfaction. Factors influencing job satisfaction negatively were related to relationship to administration and the power to change organisational policies. In a later study by Ellenbecker et al. (2008), job satisfaction and tenure were presented as the strongest predictors of nurse retention. However, job satisfaction is probably not only of vital importance to nurses. Ellenbecker and Cushman (2012) proposed in an extended theoretical model, including patient outcomes that the qualities of patient care will be affected by how satisfied nurses are in their jobs. Cowin et al. (2008) investigated the relationships between nurses' professional identity or self-concept, job satisfaction and retention plans. Their findings suggested that nurses' self-concept had a stronger relationship to retention than to job satisfaction. However, the study did not focus exclusively on nurses in elderly care. Therefore, to facilitate the recruitment and retention of nurses it is important to further explore nurses' perceptions of their professional work in nursing homes and home based care.

### 1.2. Professional identity

Professional identity as a concept is not well described in nursing literature, and has been addressed in terms of similar and related concepts, for example, professionalism or professional self. Johnson et al. (2012) explained that formation of professional identity involves a sense of values, practices and purposes associated with the nursing role, acquired through socialisation, commencing at the start of nursing education and extending during a life-long career. In an earlier study by Fagermoen (1997) professional identity could be conceptualised in terms of what it meant to be and act as a nurse directly linked to everyday nursing practice. Skår (2009) conceptualised professional autonomy on a similar note by illustrating how experienced registered nurses defined autonomy in terms of being knowledgeable, confident, and having the personal courage to act. Ellenbecker (2001) discussed nurses' professional autonomy in terms of meeting professional standards and providing care beneficial to patients. However, formation of professional identity does not take place in a void. It is socially constructed and evolves in interaction with significant and generalised others (Shaffir and Pawluch, 2003), in a process of actively gaining skills and knowledge, values and attitudes of a group that the individual seeks to become a member of. Professional identity evolves through education (Levett-Jones et al., 2007), and through professional experience gained over time in interaction with colleagues and patients (Fagermoen, 1997).

In the light of the expected nursing shortage in elderly care, it was deemed important to explore how elderly care nurses perceived their work, and thereby contribute to the existing knowledge of factors for attracting and retaining nurses to a much needed area.

### 1.3. Aim of the study

The aim of the present study was to illuminate how nurses, working in nursing homes and home based care, perceived their professional work.

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