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Novice nurses' perceptions of acute situations – A phenomenographic study

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A B S T R A C T

Background: Today's nurses face complex patient challenges and increased patient acuity. Novice nurses may feel unprepared for some of the tasks facing them. In order to prevent adverse events and improve patient outcomes, the management of acute situations has been identified as an area needing attention. Despite this, it is not yet clear what novice nurses themselves perceive as an acute situation. Therefore, the aim of this study is to describe novice nurses' perceptions of acute situations.

Method: The study has a qualitative, descriptive design with a phenomenographic approach. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with twelve novice nurses, with less than a year of working experience, about their perceptions of acute situations.

Results: Acute situations are perceived as situations that occur suddenly, that involve shortage of time, or that generate a sense of insufficient personal competence. When acute situations arise, nurses experience a feeling of overwhelming responsibility. Acute situations involve not only deteriorating patient health but can also include challenging interpersonal relations or deficiencies in organisational procedures.

Conclusion: An acute situation, as perceived by novice nurses, contains significantly more than medical manifestations related to the patient, a prominent perception being that interpersonal relations are crucial for appropriate management.

1. Introduction

Novice nurses are expected to respond to acute situations as often and with the same competence as experienced nurses [1]. Clinical decision-making in acute situations is complicated and high-stakes decision-making is vital [2]. Novice nurses are described as being unprepared for the task of working as fully qualified nurses [3]. This has resulted in concerns regarding a gap between nursing education and practice in the management of acute situations, both in Sweden [4,5] and elsewhere [1]. Acute situations are however an area lacking clear definition. The development of new pedagogic methods in nursing education programmes will require knowledge of the variety of perceptions of acute situations among novice nurses.

The aim of this study is to describe acute situations from the perspective of novice nurses. This study forms part of a larger project investigating novice nurses and how they experience acute situations, including the challenges they face when dealing with situations they perceive as being acute.

2. Background

Novice nurses face many challenges. One of the problems they experience is the feeling of being unprepared for actually working as nurses. An integrative review revealed that inadequate preparation leads to an increase in errors that directly affect their patients, and poorer patient outcomes are observed. Near-miss situations and other adverse events are also associated with novice nurses [3]. This raises concerns about educational standards and prompts discussion about gaps that may exist between education and practice [3]. Concerns regarding the gap between nursing education and practice have been raised in Sweden and in 2010 this led to a study [5] initiated by the Association of Local Authorities and Regions, to determine whether nurses' education met the needs they faced on the job. The Association also investigated the opinions of nursing managers regarding the skills and knowledge required of graduates on the ward. The study showed that education was, to a large extent, satisfactory in meeting care demands, but that it needed improvement in certain areas including the following: the ability to handle complex situations; prioritizing;

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managing and distributing nursing work; and the ability to act in acute situations [5]. Ohlsson [4] also indicated that novice nurses had trouble in handling complex and acute situations. It is interesting to note that none of the aforementioned studies provided a definition of an acute situation.

The definition of ‘acute’ is somewhat unclear, although it is commonly used in both theoretical and clinical nursing contexts. The semantic definition of ‘acute’ has been given as sharp and intense. Synonyms also suggest a temporal perspective, something that is rapid or swift [6]. Acute situations constitute a frequently used concept in healthcare in Sweden and elsewhere. The Association of Local Authorities and Regions, that provides material and education for healthcare personnel, has therefore divided its SBAR (Situation, Background, Assessment, Recommendation) into ‘acute situations’ and ‘non-acute situations’. No clear definition of the terms is provided but the work sheets distributed for acute situations contain an A-E assessment to be made by the nurse reporting or seeking consultation [7].

Today’s nurses work in a stressful environment with complex patient challenges and increased patient acuity [8]. Rising patient acuity can be attributed to an ageing population as well as to an increasing incidence of complex comorbidities [9]. Patients who were traditionally admitted to critical care units are increasingly being treated in general hospital wards [10]. Nurses are the healthcare professionals who have most direct contact with patients. It is their ability to recognize, interpret and act on physiological status that gives them a key role in many acute situations [11]. It is likely that a nurse, novice or experienced, is the first to respond in acute situations. It is consequently vital for nurses to possess skills enabling them actively to observe, recognize and manage a deteriorating patient in an acute situation [12]. Purling et al. investigated the preparedness of novice nurses to recognize and respond to deteriorating patients and indicated that this vital competency was insufficiently developed. They attributed this to poor clinical skills including decision-making, and lack of experience, and called for appropriate educational strategies to address these issues [1].

For nursing educators, the lack of a clear definition of what constitutes an acute situation is problematic. It has been identified as an issue requiring improvement in education and is considered to be of great importance. If nursing education is going to address future healthcare needs it will be necessary to bridge the gap between education and practice. The present study assumes that there are differences in experiences of acute care situations leading to a variety of perceptions of what an acute situation actually is. In order to develop new pedagogic methods in nursing education programmes it is important to understand this variety of perceptions. A first step is therefore to investigate different perceptions of what constitutes an acute situation. Therefore, the aim of this study is to describe the acute situation as a phenomenon from the perspective of novice nurses.

3. Method

3.1. Design

A qualitative, descriptive design employing a phenomenographic approach has been chosen. Phenomenography is a qualitative method that aims to systematize thoughts in terms of how people perceive significant aspects of reality. The method uses a second order perspective [13] by describing phenomena as they are perceived. In this study, a phenomenon must be understood in a phenomenological way i.e. something as experienced by the participants in the study. It is the participants’ lived experience that is the focus of interest and description here [14]. The phenomenon studied here is thus novice nurses’ perceptions of acute situations. The aim of phenomenography is to identify differences and similarities in how participants in a study experience and understand this phenomenon, that is, how it is perceived by human consciousness [14].

Therefore, phenomenography provides a holistic view of the

perceptions of a particular phenomenon, despite the fact that it may be perceived differently by different people under different circumstances. Ideally, statements from participants in a phenomenographic study show rich variation in their experiences of how a specific phenomenon is perceived [15].

3.2. Participants

In order to be able to describe the phenomenon ‘acute situations’ as perceived by novice nurses, 12 novice registered nurses participated: 11 females and 1 male, aged 22 to 44. The definition of novice used in this study was having less than 12 months of work experience as a nurse. This definition builds on Benner’s novice to expert theory [16]. Work experience ranged from 6 to 11 months. Participants were recruited from 5 different hospitals and 11 different hospital wards in southwest Sweden. All had graduated in two student cohorts from the same Swedish university. Inclusion criteria for the study were less than one year of work experience as a registered nurse and employment on different hospital wards including medical, surgical and orthopaedic care. In Sweden, nursing education requires completion of a three-year programme at a university or university college. All graduates receive a Bachelor of Science in nursing or caring science.

3.3. Data collection

Data was collected using semi-structured interviews that were recorded and transcribed verbatim. The first author (AS) conducted all the interviews in locations chosen by the participants. Interviews lasted between 53 and 82 min and took place during 2016. As it was important to obtain a rich variety of lived experiences related to the phenomenon “acute situations” (i.e. care situations which are perceived as acute), three open-ended questions were posed. These questions aimed to encourage the participants to reflect and speak freely about their perceptions without reference to any specific guidelines or protocols that may exist.

The questions were:

- What is an acute situation for you?
- Can you give examples of an acute situation on your ward?
- Can you describe an acute situation that you have experienced?

To stimulate in-depth reflection, probing questions were specific to each individual and dependent upon previous responses, for example the following: Can you explain that? What did you feel then? What did you think then?

3.4. Data analysis

This study was analyzed according to the phenomenographic method described by Dahlgren and Fallsberg [17]. Text familiarization was initially achieved by reading the whole data set numerous times. Condensation then involved selecting significant statements related to perception of the phenomenon of acute situations. Statements were then compared to determine similarities and differences. Data was synthesized as qualitatively different categories, representing the main outcome of phenomenographic research [14,17]. Each category in the Results section, presented below, represents perceptions of an acute situation.

3.5. Ethical considerations

This study was conducted in accordance with the requirements of the Helsinki Declaration [18]. This type of study is not within the boundaries of the ethic review act 2003:460 that regulates research involving humans in Sweden.

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