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An exploration of nurses' understanding of parenting in hospital

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment
of the requirements for the degree
of Master of Philosophy (Nursing)
at Massey University

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2000

Abstract

Parental involvement in their child's care in hospital is common place. Research indicates that parents want to actively participate in the care of their child. Nurses' responses to parental presence in hospital have been examined in previous research, especially with regard to attitudes, perspectives and role division. There was however a gap in the literature with regard to nurses' understanding of parenting in hospital. Within New Zealand there was no research examining nurses' understanding of parenting. The research described in this 75 point thesis explored the nurses' understanding of parenting in hospital.

Using focus groups as the research method, eight nurses were invited to share their understanding of parenting in a New Zealand hospital. The data was analysed using thematic analysis informed by Stevens (1996). Although the size of the study was limited, this research has been able to raise some important issues about nurses' understanding of parenting in hospital, including the conflict perceived between parents and nurses, and the participants "ideal" parent-nurse relationship.

Acknowledgements

My sincere thanks and gratitude to the participants who took part in this research. Without you, it would not have happened.

Thank you to my supervisor for this research, Dr Gillian White, whose support, encouragement and quality control has been greatly valued and appreciated.

Thank you to my family, friends and work colleagues whose support and interest in the research has ensured I kept 'on track'.

Thank you to my partner, John whose ongoing support, time and energy has kept me going.

Finally to my sons, Sergei and Alexander who help me see another side of life.

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Introduction

Child health is an area of major concern in New Zealand (Ministry of Health, 1998). In this country, children are being hospitalised at an increasing rate. Between 1988 and 1995, there was an annual increase of 5% in the hospitalisation of children aged 0- 14 years (Ministry of Health, 1998). Nurses and parents are involved in the care of children in hospital. Parents want to be involved in their child's care, and are willing to participate actively with nurses, but need support and information from nurses to complete this role successfully. In the past, research has centred more on the parent than the nurse.

The research described in this thesis is nurses' understanding of parenting in hospital. Nurses' understanding of parenting in paediatric settings has been explored in the United Kingdom, and the United States of America, particularly in relation to role expectations of nurses and parents, but there is little published work in New Zealand.

Using focus groups, this research explores nurses' understanding of parenting. Research participants were registered nurses working in the paediatric wards of a regional hospital in N.Z. The data was collected for this project in January and February, 1998.

1.1. Background

I have been practising as a registered nurse since 1980. From 1994 to 1998, I was a nurse lecturer with clinical experience in the paediatric area. The opportunity to facilitate nursing students working with children and families led me to ask many questions related to the nursing care of children. Sometimes I noticed misunderstanding and conflict occurring between parents and nursing staff. I talked to nurses about their experiences with parents and received a wide variety of responses. Some nurses had great empathy with parents, while others offered their opinions of how parents should 'be' in hospital.

I began to search for information about nurses' understanding of parenting. A review of the literature revealed research about parents' and nurses' attitudes, perspectives and role division, but little specifically about nurses' understanding of parenting in the hospital setting. It seemed that research around nurses' understanding of parenting had moved too far, too fast. Focusing on the roles of the parent and the nurse was premature. I believed that first, we as nurses needed to understand parenting in hospital and the place to start was by asking nurses about their understanding of parenting in hospital.

Knowledge about nurses' understanding of parenting in hospital is valuable to paediatric nurses, nurse educators and parents because it:

- a) opens up the dialogue between nurses concerning an issue that is not usually discussed freely
- b) improves the relationships between nurses and parents
- c) enables parents in hospital to have a better understanding of nurses' perceptions
- c) potentiates a better outcome for the child in hospital
- d) contributes to nursing education

1.2. Aims of the Research

The research has three major aims:

1. To explore nurses' understanding of parenting in hospital.
2. To inform paediatric nursing practice and education about nurses' understanding of parenting
3. To improve outcomes for children and parents in hospitals.

The question posed in this study was:

What is nurses' understanding of parenting in hospital?

1.3. Definitions

For the purposes of this research, the following definitions will be used:

Nurse - a registered comprehensive nurse, or registered general and obstetric nurse

Parenting - having sole, or shared responsibility for the upbringing of a

child. A parent can be someone who has begotten or borne the child, or someone who is the primary care giver of the child. Parenting includes all the actions, and attributes of the parent in caring for the child.

Child - a boy or girl from birth to puberty (Gordon, 1982).

1.4. Locating the researcher

As the sole researcher, I undertook the data collection. Data was collected in focus groups, comprising of the participants who were registered nurses from the paediatric wards of a hospital in N.Z. At the time of data collection, the nurses worked in one of three different areas: a general ward for in-patient care for children; a day ward providing day care for children with a variety of health problems; and the Special Care Baby Unit (SCBU), providing neonatal care.

In preliminary discussion about the research with potential participants, I determined there would not be a conflict of interest. Prior to commencing the research, I had some ideas of what nurses may understand about parenting in hospital, mainly arising from my own interactions with parents and nurses over a period of years. Therefore I began the research with some predetermined notions. One of the purposes of research is however, to gather knowledge systematically and rigorously. My ideas were rapidly challenged by the participants' rich dialogue and debate around the topic under focus. During the process of undertaking the research project, I also moved from not being a parent to being the parent of two sons. I experienced being a parent in the paediatric ward, and this inevitably affected the depth of the interpretation of the data.

In this thesis, research into nurses' understanding of parenting in hospital will be offered, analysed and discussed, beginning with **Chapter Two**, the literature review. Two major areas of research are reviewed. The first is an exploration of parents' perspectives of being with their child in hospital. It seemed that understanding parenting in hospital from the parent's perspective would serve as a reference point for the nurses' understanding of parenting. The second area reviewed is nurses' perspective of parenting in hospital. The

historical background of parenting in hospital is also presented as background to the study.

Chapter Three, the method chapter describes and outlines the method used in the research. Part One of the chapter describes the theory of Focus Groups, and outlines the usual research approach when implementing this method. Part Two explains the method as used in this study. Advantages and disadvantages of focus groups as a research method are detailed, as is the use and value of this method in nursing research. Ethical issues in focus groups are also presented.

In **Chapter Four**, the results of the data analysis are presented. Thematic analysis, informed by Zemke and Kramlinger (1989), and Holloway and Wheeler (1996) was used with particular attention paid to analysis specific to focus groups, as outlined by Stevens (1996). Four major issues emerged from the data, and these are discussed. A conceptual model of the analysis evolved from the data and is presented in Appendix 1.

A discussion of the research findings is presented in **Chapter Five**. The strengths and limitations of the method are addressed including issues related to trustworthiness, validity and reliability. Finally my interpretation of the data with reference to relevant literature is discussed.

In the concluding chapter, **Chapter Six** the research is summarised. Policy, educational and practice issues are offered and discussed. Suggestions for change are outlined. Further research building on the current research is recommended.