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LIVING WITH A DAMAGED BODY

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Isabelle Mary Sherrard

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Abstract

Quadriplegia subsequent to cervical spinal cord injury is now survivable because of advances in medical technology. Nurses are closely involved with these injured people but few studies on the condition are reported in nursing literature. In this limited study, using grounded theory methodology, findings, important to nursing, emerged that quadriplegic people, despite their dependence, strive to live as independently as possible. From this a theoretical model was developed and diagrammed to demonstrate the continuing movement which quadriplegic people constantly experience of fluctuations between the two polarities of dependence and independence.

From nine participants, selected by snowball sampling, data were collected in a semi-structured interview and analysed by constant comparative analysis. The core process which emerged was categorised as 'living with a damaged body'. This is the given of quadriplegia, a constant, irreversible biological condition which enforces dependence on others for life sustaining care. Four subsidiary processes were identified, three, which contribute to movement towards independence, were categorised as, 'discovering life', 'generating family and social support', and 'seeking satisfaction from work and play'. The remaining process which opposes movement toward independence is categorised as 'battling the odds', and drags quadriplegic people towards dependence. Disability is a socially constructed notion which creates many barriers or 'odds' against which they must constantly battle. Validation to confirm these findings and the theoretical model was obtained from two, non-participant, well-adjusted, long term, quadriplegic professionals.

Nurses are in an ideal position to contribute to the movement of quadriplegic persons towards their desired state of independence and to prevent as much slippage back to dependence as is possible, given the core process of living with a damaged body. To make an effective contribution nurses need to know and understand the five categories of process. The model is designed to assist nurses to do this.

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