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'On the path, off the trail':

The relational work of nurses in outreach health

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Abstract

This research study draws on the practice reflections of nurses working with people who are homeless and experiencing mental health problems to explore engagement as a core nursing practice in this setting. Therapeutic relationships and engagement are at the heart of nursing practice, and this is especially so in mental health nursing. Homeless and hard-to-reach clients are an underserved population for mental health services. This research seeks to 'make visible' the ways in which mental health nurses uniquely and successfully engage with people experiencing homelessness and marginalisation, which in turn contributes to improved health and social outcomes for those people.

Eight New Zealand registered nurses were interviewed and critical thematic analysis used to interpret the resulting data. The research findings were that nurses practicing in this specific homeless health context value relationships as a core nursing intervention. The work of engagement was described as uncertain. The research participants echoed the nursing theory and literature that argues nurses' relational work is often unseen and undervalued within health systems. Relational work is described as a defining concept for mental health nursing yet the lack of visibility of this skilled work adds to nurses' experience of uncertainty. The recommendations suggest ways to render visible and hold central the nursing work of engagement.

“The relentless complexity of the world is off to the side of the trail.”

Gary Snyder (1990, p. 145)

from the essay *On the Path, Off the Trail*.

“You do not know what wars are going on down there / where the spirit meets the bone.”

Miller Williams (1997, p. 55)

from the poem *Compassion*.

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*She stares
over my left shoulder
into blank corners
and seems to watch
who knows what
bright travellers.*

Fiona Benson (2014)

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