BATTLING THE PANDEMIC: NIGHTINGALE STORIES FROM THE COVID WARD

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Abstract

Background: Healthcare workers, especially nurses, are always at the forefront of fight against any epidemic, and they risk their own lives to perform their duties. Since they are likely to be in close contact with COVID-19 patients, they are particularly vulnerable to infection and spread of the virus among colleagues and family members. Nurses constitute a vital and the largest workforce in combating this pandemic illness as they serve as main front liners at both the patient's bedside and in communities for 24 hours, seven days a week (24/7).

Methods: A qualitative-phenomenological research design was utilized to assist the researchers in apprehending the thoughts and experiences of the nurses. Participants were chosen through the use of authoritative sampling.

Result: The sense of powerlessness is overwhelming for COVID Ward nurses as they were under extreme pressure resulting in fear not only of being exposed to infected patients but were scared that they were placing their family at greater risk of acquiring the virus.

Conclusion: Apprehension of acquiring indicates that majority of the participants were afraid of obtaining COVID-19 virus during their time in the COVID Ward. This theme was supported by Unver and Yenigun in 2021 where they stated that healthcare workers are the most affected group in this process and in addition to working in one-on-one contact with patients, they experience serious anxiety and fear due to the conditions.

Keywords: COVID- 19, Battling the Pandemic, Nightingale Stories

Background

Healthcare workers, especially nurses, are always at the forefront of fight against any epidemic, and they risk their own lives to perform their duties. Since they are likely to be in close contact with COVID-19 patients, they are particularly vulnerable to infection and spread of the virus among colleagues and family members. Nurses constitute a vital and the largest workforce in combating this pandemic illness as they serve as main front liners at both the patient's bedside and in communities for 24 hours, seven days a week (24/7). They are in the most contact with suspected or confirmed COVID-19 patients from screening, hospitalization and monitoring after discharge. However, despite their known and heroic contributions in battling this global crisis, nurses have reported experiencing different intrinsic and extrinsic struggles and challenges in and out of their workplaces (Sadang, 2020) [1].

Most studies revealed that nurses have encountered depression, anxiety, stress, burnout, and even work-related bullying in their day-to-day battle against COVID-19. Health workers, including nurses, are caught in the middle, facing harassment, violence and discrimination in their respective facilities as well as in communities. Nurses assigned in communities, most especially far-flung areas affected by the pandemic, were found to have more psychological issues and distress than those working in other healthcare settings, and this includes nurses' deployed in most community quarantine facilities amidst COVID-19 (Sadang, 2020).

Nurses often experience heightened anxiety and work-related stress as a result of their concern about their susceptibility to infection. Studies have shown nurses designated for the care of COVID-19 patients were exposed to inappropriate psychological and

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professional circumstances however they still managed and continued to render nursing care for their patients. Quality nursing care for patients with COVID-19 is a major challenge. Nurses themselves are exposed to serious risk and even death while administering care for patients with COVID-19. Working stress, the daily influx of patients to hospitals, low hospital capacity, and the substandard ratio of nurses to patients have made the phenomenon of care problematic (Schwartz, King, Yen MY, 2020).

Accordingly, it is important to examine the nurses' experience with care. Moral distress occurs when nurses cannot provide compassionate care to patients, and it contributes to nursing burnout and compassion fatigue (AACN Advanced Critical Care 2021). To effectively play their role during this pandemic, it is essential for nurses to maintain their psychological and mental health (Mo et al., 2020; Catton, 2020). However, the literature has shown that the emergence of COVID–19 has significantly impacted the psychological and mental well-being of nurses. Vast amounts of evidence have shown a significant association between the COVID–19 outbreak and adverse mental health issues such as stress or burnout, depression and anxiety (Wu et al., 2020; Nemati et al., 2020; Mo et al., 2020).

The main purpose of this study is to promote an acknowledgement and a better understanding with the challenges and experiences faced by the health workers specifically the COVID ward nurses. This study aimed to explore and know the challenges faced by the nurses in battling against the COVID-19 pandemic. Specifically, this intended to search the question: "What is the lived experience of nurses assigned in the COVID ward?"

Methods

Research Design

This study utilized phenomenological research method to understand and interpret data. Qualitative research focuses on insights into and understanding of individual's perceptions. It attempts to obtain rich, in-depth and valid data. Phenomenology is an approach to qualitative research that focuses on the commonality of a lived experience within a particular group. The fundamental goal of the approach is to arrive at a description of the nature of the particular phenomenon (Creswell, 2013).

Respondents of the Study

This study enlisted the participants through authoritative sampling. They should meet the following predetermined criteria: (a) Registered Filipino Nurses (male or female) whether living in the Philippines or abroad; (b) they must be rotating in the COVID ward for at least 6 months.

Instruments of the Study

For a more natural conversation, this study collected data using a semi-structured interview guide through an individual online interview, a technique appropriate to the phenomenological approach. The researchers translated the questionnaires into Tagalog language, so that the participants could use their preferably language to express themselves. Smartphones, audio recorders, pens, and notebooks were used to record all of the data materials used.

Data Analysis

The data was analyzed using the thematic method, Colaizzi system. According to Moustakas, it guides the reader through the process of how to conduct a phenomenological study step-by-step. And so, this provides more in-depth insights on the successful phenomenological studies from distinct contexts. The following are the seven steps in this method:

(1) collecting the participants' descriptions,
(2) understanding the depth of the meanings,
(3) extracting the important sentences,
(4) conceptualizing important themes,
(5) categorizing the concepts and topics,
(6) constructing comprehensive descriptions of the issues examined, and
(7) validating the data following the four criteria by Lincoln and Guba (Karimi and Fereidouni, 2020) [10].

Results

The six participants were chosen through authoritative sampling. The data from the participants were gathered through the use of semi-structured interview guide, smartphones and audio recordings. The collected data were transcribed. Over all, phenomenological assisted us in retelling the COVID ward nurses' stories for further understanding them, while protecting their stories. It augmented us further in analyzing the data through diverging information into themes to fully seize the participants' thoughts.

The following themes were generated from the participants' stories:

THEME 1: Apprehension of Acquiring the Virus. The abrupt change in hospital setting has been difficult for COVID Ward nurses. When it came to their surroundings and problems adapting to the new normal, the majority of COVID Ward nurses voiced concern of obtaining the virus. Despite the obstacles and hurdles, their care and support for the patient has made a significant contribution to the pandemic's efficacy.

THEME 2: Commiseration Among COVID Nurses. COVID Ward nurses are in the vanguard of acknowledging the needs and burdens of patients without casting judgment. They have to put their selves in their patients' situations with sympathy and create appropriate treatments. The emotions as a part of everyday life can be felt by COVID Ward nurses. Hence as a front liner a nurse needs to understand that the art of dealing with difficult emotions is important for a better quality of care for patients.

THEME 3: Witnessing a deteriorating patient. Fear to witness a patient suffering has become a frequent problem of COVID ward nurses. The healthcare system has been overwhelmed and as a consequence, the healthcare workers have been experiencing fatigue and depression. However, with the help of their friends and family, terms like impossibilities and unattainable have been replaced with prayers and hopes in order to continue caring for the patient. Participants strongly believed that in caring for a patient it is not how much you do, but how much love you put in the process.

THEME: Commitment to the Nursing Profession. In light of new methods and advancements in the healthcare setting, the commitment construct was developed. COVID Ward nurses needed to go beyond present practice, recognition, and the diversity of workplace ties and responsibility at the same time to stay relevant. The importance of career dedication motivates nurses to stay in the COVID Ward despite struggles. Nurses with a strong sense of professional commitment and the ability to set their own career goals will make major changes in the way they accomplish duties and responsibilities at this point in their careers.

Implications
The following are the implications, based from the themes generated:

The sense of powerlessness is overwhelming for COVID Ward nurses as they were under extreme pressure resulting in fear not only of being exposed to infected patients but were scared that they were placing their family at greater risk of acquiring the virus.

Everyday interaction with COVID patients is one of the reasons nurses might have acquired the virus. Thus, worriedness is being felt by the nurses. Despite of being essential but underpaid, COVID Ward nurses continue to care for their patients during the pandemic and beyond, resulting in improved health outcomes and important immediate and long-term goals for individual nurses, society, and the nursing profession.

When nurses observe deteriorating patients, they don't feel at ease as they have witnessed another life at the brink of life. Thus, the most heartbreaking moments were felt by them.

Conclusion
Apprehension of acquiring indicates that majority of the participants were afraid of obtaining COVID-19 virus during their time in the COVID Ward. This theme was supported by Unver and Yenigun in 2021 where they stated that healthcare workers are the most affected group in this process and in addition to working in one-on-one contact with patients, they experience serious anxiety and fear due to the conditions. Nurses have to put their selves in their patients' situations with empathy and create appropriate treatments. The emotions as a part of everyday life can be felt by COVID Ward nurses. This theme supported by a participant cited in Bottino in 2019 stated that "*I found myself in many instances in which I couldn't take that step to empathy because it would be too emotional for me. I still had to have my mind on very technical nursing tasks requiring my utmost focus.*" Hence as a front liner a nurse needs to understand that the art of dealing with difficult emotions is important for a better quality of care for patients.

The participants demonstrated that with the help of their friends and family, terms like impossibilities and unattainable have been replaced with prayers and hopes in order to continue caring for the patient. This theme was supported by (Reger et al., 2020) stated that with the severity of this crisis and the constant exposure to uncertainty, loss, and death, there are concerns for the vicarious trauma that nurses may experience.

Nursing is a profession that has specific criteria including strong commitment to offering services to the society, belief in each individual's respect and value, commitment to the education, and autonomy. This theme was supported by a participant as cited in Jafaragaee, Parvizy, Mehrdard, and Rafii in 2012, and was stated "*We know that caring is the essence of nursing. So, I try to offer the best care to my patients. It's my commitment.*" It made them realized that professional commitment was an important concept to nursing. Some significant managerial and organizational factors can affect professional commitment. On the other hand, nursing is a humanistic profession and most of the nurses devote themselves to caring of others. All challenges that the participants have encountered, our study shows that amidst the pandemic, nurses dealt with various problems such as psychological, emotional, and spiritual distress. But as a professional they convert all the pressures and stress into motivation which

helped them to provide adequate care for their patients. It is also stated in Adaptation Model that the person is submitted to a scheme that includes the stimulus, which generates the coping mechanisms and results in the response of the individual, family or community, which end up supporting another stimulus.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare there are no significant competing financial, professional, or personal interests that might have influenced the performance or presentation of the work described in this manuscript.

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