

Negotiating ethical challenges in sensitive research: The registered nurse caring for her own relative in palliative care

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Purpose of the study

This study uses discourse analysis to examine the experiences of female registered nurses caring for their own relatives in palliative care. As people living within their own families and communities, nurses sometimes feel drawn to use their professional knowledge and skills to care for their own relatives, and may be encouraged to do so by other health professionals and family members [1]. There is little research that explores the forms and meaning of caring work across home and work boundaries and the effect that simultaneous paid and unpaid caring work has on women's lives [2]. This research contributes to knowledge about the nurse/person interface and how nurses negotiate their lives across the personal and professional boundaries between their work and home lives. However, it involves the collection of data related to bereavement experiences, which requires careful management of ethical challenges throughout the research process. Ethical approval for the research was granted by the Victoria University of Wellington Human Ethics Committee in June 2005.

While this research affords nurses the opportunity to talk in depth about the experience of caring for their own relative in palliative care, it constitutes sensitive research. Research is considered sensitive when it presents a substantial threat to both the participants and the researcher [3], which in this case requires surfacing memories about the loss of a loved one and providing palliative care for this person. Problematic areas in the research include recruiting appropriate participants, obtaining consent, avoiding harm to both the participants and the researcher, and ensuring anonymity for the participants. Anticipating and planning for potential problems is essential for the ethical conduct of the research and in obtaining approval to conduct it [4]. While the participants are registered nurses who, as health professionals have substantial knowledge of emotional self care, there is the potential for discussion of events surrounding the illness and death of a family member to evoke feelings of discomfort. This presentation illuminates specific threats that have surfaced in the process of conducting the research and identifies strategies that were used to minimise and manage these threats.

Keywords:

Palliative care, bereavement, emotional vulnerability, sensitive research, research ethics

References

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