

27th World Nursing Education Conference

November 12-14, 2018 | Berlin, Germany

South African critical care nurses' experiences with death and dying in the workplace

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Available literature suggests that critical care nurses have varied experiences in relation to their experiences in relation to end-of-life patient care. However, few studies have examined the involvement of South African intensive care nurses' in caring for the dying patient, their grief, reactions to death in a critical care environment and the extent to which their nursing practice is based on shared beliefs, experiences and attitudes. Therefore, the aim of this study was to explore experiences and attitudes of South African critical care nurses regarding grief, death and dying in a critical care environment. Using a qualitative, descriptive phenomenological research approach, the study sampled nurses working in critical care units of the participating institution and posed only one central research question to all the participants. Further probing questions were based on the responses from the following central research question, "What are the critical care nurses' experiences of death and dying in an ICU?" Findings revealed that issues such as communication, multicultural diversity, education and coping mechanisms relating to caring for the critically ill and dying patient are essential in nursing education and practice. Repeated exposure to grief, leads to occupational stress and burn out causing emotional disengagement from caring. This ultimately impacts on the quality of care for both the dying patient and their family. Nurses caring for the critically ill or dying patient, need to have support networks and strategies put in place, not only to assist in providing care, but also for their own emotional support and well-being.