

‘Hands on’ assessment: a strategy for improving patient safety in emergency settings

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Objectives

Emergency Department (ED) nurses play a key role in protecting patients from the harmful effects of health care errors and preventable adverse events. Gaps (defined as discontinuities in care) appear frequently in emergency contexts. The expertise of ED nurses ensures these gaps rarely lead to adverse events. How emergency nurses successfully anticipate, detect and bridge gaps has not been comprehensively investigated, however. A key aim of this study was to redress this oversight. The study’s objectives were to describe (i) the gaps commonly anticipated, detected and bridged by nurses and (ii) how nurses anticipate, detect and bridge gaps.

Methods

The study was conducted as a naturalistic inquiry using a qualitative exploratory descriptive approach. Data were collected via in depth, semi-structured interviews from a purposeful sample of 71 registered nurses of whom 19 were ED nurses. The audio-taped interviews were transcribed verbatim and the data were analysed using content, thematic and triangulation analysis strategies.

Results

Analysis of the interview data revealed that safety is created through nurses’ vigilant observation and assessment of patients using a ‘hands-on’, ‘head-to-toe’ and ‘systematic approach’, which enabled the detection of gaps and the trigger for remedial action to protect patients from the harmful consequences of the gaps detected.

Conclusion

The study captured many instances where nurses provided the conditions, both necessary and sufficient, for patient safety. The investigation of how nurses anticipate, identify and bridge gaps generates valuable insights into successful everyday nursing performance and deepens understanding of how ED nurses create safety at the sharp end of the system.