

Sadism: The sharp end of compassion fatigue?

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Professional and ethical misconduct among nurses is an ongoing source of consumer complaint, distress, dissatisfaction and adverse outcome. There is historical accord among nurse researchers that compassion fatigue and burnout are at times positively associated with reduced standards of care and staff-initiated misconduct towards clients. In those rare instances where the maltreatment of clients and the unprofessional conduct of nurses have been examined in depth, research typically seems to suggest that malevolence is a noxious but ultimately arbitrary symptomatic manifestation of fatigue and frustration among an overworked, emotionally overextended professional group. However, despite decades of research indicating that as much as 80% of nurses demonstrate moderate to high levels of compassion fatigue and burnout, there is evidence to suggest that many times client-complaints can be traced back to a much smaller number of repeat offenders. Indeed, a review of the literature, popular media and governmental and consumer watchdog reports highlights recurrent anecdotal evidence that a subset of those who abuse clients physically, psychologically and neglectfully actually seem to derive pleasure or satisfaction from doing so. This is the very definition of sadism.

While targeted exploration of this phenomenon has not been identified in the nursing literature, research in the fields of law enforcement, militarism, interrogation, international law, humanitarianism, psychology and philosophy suggests this as a path worth investigating. Even so, no truly cohesive or comprehensive theoretical framework has been found in any field of study that adequately deconstructs the motivations behind misconduct among professionals such as nurses when directed towards vulnerable groups.

Arguably the Emergency Department has long been identified as an epicentre of workplace violence and a significant contributor to consumer complaints statistics in healthcare services. Therefore, this presentation will explore the contemporary literature and the possible nexus between compassion fatigue, burnout, abusive behaviour and sadistic traits among Emergency Nurses; and present the proposed PhD research inspired by this topic.

The proposed PhD study will report the prevalence of compassion fatigue and burnout among Emergency Nurses, the extent and nature of nurse-initiated abuse of clients, possible links between the two and nurses' own understanding of their motivations for unethical unprofessional conduct towards clients. A mixed method approach will be undertaken with the adaptation of several validated tools particularly the Maslach Burnout Inventory, The Conflict Tactics Scale and the Short Sadistic Impulse Scale. The Qualitative arm will employ semi-structured interviews to explore nurses' own experiences and understanding of their conduct when conflict occurs.

It is important to note that the current research does not seek to dispute the widely accepted role of compassion fatigue and burnout in reduced standards of care among nurses. Rather, it aims to expand our understanding of compassion fatigue and burnout and any association that may exist with the frequency, nature and intellectual / emotional impetus of nurse-initiated abuse of clients.

If you wish to register your interest in participating in this upcoming research project please visit <http://jack15633.wix.com/registeryourinterest> . From this site you can also elect to follow the project's progress and key dates by proceeding to the associated facebook page.