

The Lived Experience of Nursing Students Caring for COVID-19 Patients

Priscella Correa PhD, RN, Shravan Devkota MSN, APRN, FNP-C, Collette Loftin PhD, RN CNE,
Alee Friemel MSN, RN CNE, Sherri Drinnon MSN, APRN, FNP-C

Purpose:

There was little reported documentation about the experiences of student nurses caring for COVID-19 patients in the clinical setting. The purpose of this study was to gain a deeper understanding of the lived experience of students caring for COVID-19 patients in the hospital setting.

Issue of Concern:

COVID-19 posed a serious threat to health care workers worldwide including student nurses. Caring for COVID-19 patients in the hospital setting provided the students with big challenges, and it became essential for faculty members to understand the students' feelings and obstacles as the semester continued.

It became apparent that many of our senior nursing students were experiencing uncertainty and stress in a way the faculty had not previously observed. Keeping in mind that this group of students had entered the nursing program just prior to the COVID-19 outbreak, it was not unexpected that they could be adversely affected by the pandemic and its effect on their clinical experiences. Without a doubt, students were caring for many more severely ill and dying patients than nursing students had in previous semesters.

Background:

The wave of COVID-19 pandemic hit the world, schools and students were affected in many ways. Schools had to migrate courses to an online or hybrid platform while students had to adapt their learning to take care of COVID-19 patients in the clinical setting. During the fall semester of 2021, our senior nursing students were once again assigned to high acuity areas and began caring for large numbers of patients with COVID-19 during a surge in cases. While students in our program were not required to receive the COVID-19 vaccine, they were offered the vaccine and many chose to be vaccinated. Additionally, local hospitals once again had adequate supplies of personal protective equipment and all students were fit-tested for N-95 masks providing each with adequate protection prior to caring for COVID-19 patients.

Methods:

This qualitative descriptive study utilized a phenomenological approach in an effort to determine the lived experience of senior level nursing students as they cared for patients with COVID-19 during their clinical internship semester. Institutional Review Board approval was obtained from West Texas A&M University. 14 Semi-structured interviews were conducted during the late fall of 2021 and researchers utilized purposive sampling to recruit nursing students registered in their final semester of the program who had cared for COVID-19 patients during the semester. No other criteria was required for inclusion in the study.

Findings/Implications:

Four main themes were identified as relevant to their experiences including:

- 1) Importance of a support system and the ability to seek help from a source.
- 2) Moral distress characterized how student experienced some type of emotional reaction to their personal clinical experiences.
- 3) Enhancement of clinical skills throughout their experience caring for COVID-19 patients.
- 4) Significance of therapeutic communication that was needed by students caring for COVID-19 patients.

Recommendations :

Based on the themes, four recommendations were identified to help students and faculty, which included

1. The value of simulation
 - Simulation could provide students opportunities to practice in various scenarios taking care of critical patients in a monitored setting.
2. Development of a support system
 - Support Systems could provide the benefit or preventing isolation and allowing students time to defuse emotions.
3. Collaborative preceptorship
 - Preceptorship of student allows for relationship building and standardized expectations by clinical preceptor.
4. Preparation for a new era
 - Collaboration with interdisciplinary teams in advance to plan for any possible future pandemics.

Article & References available on request.