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IN THIS ISSUE:

- 7 Outbreaks—What's in a name?
- 10 Research Review
- 12 Translating clinical experience into action: Developing an educational protocol to improve intimate partner violence screening by Emergency Department nurses
- 17 Mettre son expérience clinique à profit : Développer un outil éducatif pour améliorer le dépistage de la violence entre partenaires intimes par les infirmières des services d'urgence



Research Review

By Heather McLellan

Citation

Harley, A., Johnston, A., Denny, K., Keijzers, G., Crilly, J., & Massey, D. (2019). Emergency nurses' knowledge and understanding of their role in recognising and responding to patients with sepsis: A qualitative study. *International Emergency Nursing*, 43, 106–112. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ienj.2019.01.005>

Background

Sepsis is a time-sensitive clinical event. Rapid recognition, key physical finding and escalation of intervention are crucial for successful management. The role that the emergency department (ED) nurse plays in these events may not be universally clearly understood.

Purpose of the study

To examine the understanding of experienced emergency department nurses of their role in responding to patients with sepsis, as well as of the resources and tools available to them.

Research approach and methods

The researchers used a descriptive qualitative design with semi-structured interviews to explore the experiences of the participating ED nurses. This research design choice is appropriate for summarizing the perceptions and experiences of a group of individuals, in this case experiences of ED nurses caring for sepsis patients.

Setting and sample

The study recruited emergency department trained RNs working in a large public tertiary teaching facility in Australia. The RNs were recruited by invitation from the principal investigator (PI) at employee meetings. The RNs self-selected by contacting the researcher and expressing interest in participation. Face-to-face semi-structured interviews were conducted and recorded for analysis. Qualifications for participation were that the nurses were currently employed in the area and had recent experience working with sepsis patients.

Questions in the interview guide were developed based on research recommendations in existing literature. Interviews were read and coded and the findings were organized into themes. To ensure rigour, the data were reviewed multiple times by the research team, as well as being independently reviewed by researchers with different clinical backgrounds.

Findings

The study included 14 RNs who met the criteria and agreed to participate. The experience levels of these nurses ranged from six months to 25 years. Post-analysis the research team identified six themes including contribution of the organization, appreciation of knowledge, appreciation of clinical urgency,

appreciation of the importance of staff supervision, awareness of the importance of staff experience, and awareness of the need to seek advice. Within these broader themes specific supports and barriers were identified.

Barriers inhibiting recognition and response to indicators of sepsis included high volumes of patients, patient flow through the department, lack of recognition of sepsis flags, and minimal use of screening tools. They also noted that the lack of recognition of acuity and lack of experience for junior nurses delayed escalation of intervention. Supports noted included use of a deterioration detection tool and provision of sepsis-specific education, although retention of that training was lacking.

Recommendations from this study included education and preparation of ED nurses to use sepsis screening tools, and that development of a nurse-driven sepsis pathway might improve response. There is also indication that staffing support that would allow adequate time for a thorough assessment of each patient would improve both recognition and response.

The researchers noted that the delay between caring for the patients with sepsis and participating in the interviews may have biased responses, and that conducting the research within the clinical area where staff are fatigued, still have patient care responsibilities or are distracted, also may have had a negative impact on the quality of the data.

Commentary

This qualitative study identified barriers to nurses' recognition and response to markers of sepsis and the important role they both play in successful management of sepsis from the perspective of the nurses providing the care. Many of the findings articulate well with other qualitative and quantitative research. Padilha et al. (2011) also noted the challenges for nurses in recognition of sepsis and the improvement in patient outcomes when nurses identify sepsis markers early in the disease process. One qualitative study identified a marked improvement in recognition of sepsis and escalation of intervention when focused sepsis-specific education was coupled with repeat performance of tool use (Tromp et al., 2010). They further identified the importance of nurse-driven protocols aligned with sepsis care guidelines that support nurses in collaboratively escalating treatment.

Kleinpell, Schorr and Rauen (2014) note that the physical assessment skills of the nurse are the key to identifying sepsis early and go on to note that education of nurses and provision of tools are also crucial components to improving patient outcomes.

One important point to note with this study is that while ethical approval was obtained, it is not clearly evident how confidentiality of the interview recordings was maintained. Under the heading of “rigour” the authors note that there was independent review of the transcripts by researchers with different clinical and research backgrounds to verify thematic findings, but the steps taken to maintain confidentiality are not outlined.

REFERENCES

Padilha, P., Almeida, B., Derico, B., Elmiro, F., Jesus, M., & Sousa, V. (2011). Role of nurses in the early recognition of sepsis. *Critical Care, 15*(Suppl 2), P23–P23. doi:10.1186/cc10171

Kleinpell, R., Schorr, C.A., & Rauen, C.A. (2014). Targeting sepsis as a performance improvement metric. *AACN Advanced Critical Care, 25*(2), 179–186. doi:10.1097/NCI.0000000000000015

Key Messages

- Knowing and recognizing the indicators of sepsis is a crucial role for ED nurses.
- Access to and training in the use of sepsis identification tools and nurse-driven protocols support recognition of sepsis indicators and escalation of intervention.
- Reduction of barriers improves nurses’ confidence in working collaboratively to rapidly accelerate sepsis management.

Tromp, M., Hulscher, M., Bleeker-Rovers, C., Peters, L., van Den Berg, D., Borm, G., ... Pickkers, P. (2010). The role of nurses in the recognition and treatment of patients with sepsis in the emergency department: A prospective before-and-after intervention study. *International Journal of Nursing Studies, 47*(12), 1464–1473. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijnurstu.2010.04.007>