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UCT research suggests ways to better prepare nurses for dealing with death and dying

A new course is needed within the nursing curriculum to help nurses prepare for the reality of patients who die under their care, new research from the University of Cape Town reveals.

In her thesis, Nicola Fouché, a PhD graduate from UCT, says nurses, particularly those working in critical care units, are under considerable pressure.

Fouché says: "Departing staff often give, as reasons for leaving, the emotional burnout they suffer as a result of the clash of priorities they face, the concern of critical care units to preserve life at all costs, and the personal need of nurses to manage their human contact with dying patients."

Despite critical care staff being highly trained and skilled, there is high staff turnover, particularly in paediatric critical care units.

Fouché says students studying towards the Postgraduate Diploma in Nursing (Critical Care Adult and Child) at UCT express considerable unease when confronted with discussions of death.

During research for her thesis, entitled "'We don't handle death well' - Implications for a postgraduate nursing curriculum of intensive care nurses' experience of death in ICU," Fouché spent many hours with six nurses who work mainly in paediatric critical care. She said the nurses were asked to draw pictures of their experiences with death. They later talked about them.

Fouché says: "Their sadness was palpable. Often in ICU you don't have time to say goodbye to a baby. A course won't stop the burnout and stress, but it may allow nurses the space to understand and grieve."

A course would also help nurses to understand and respect the way different cultures and religions deal with dying and death.

"Being with someone in their last days of living is a privilege. You can make that death a very significant goodbye for the family as well as yourself," says Fouché.

Fouché, an experienced critical care nurse, convenes the UCT Postgraduate Diploma in Nursing (Critical Care Nursing). She holds an MSc (Nursing), an Advanced University Diploma in Nursing Education and a Diploma in Intensive Nursing Science from UCT. Her doctoral research was supervised by Dr Kevin Williams from the Higher and Adult Education Development and Studies Unit in UCT's Humanities Faculty. Fouché graduated with a PhD from UCT on 16 December 2014.

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