



Facing Grief: The Emotional Experience of Nurses in Caring for Terminal Patients in the Palliative Care Unit

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ABSTRACT

Palliative care is a vital component of healthcare that aims to enhance the quality of life for patients with terminal illnesses by providing physical, emotional, and psychological support. Despite its significance, nurses in palliative care frequently experience emotional distress due to their prolonged exposure to suffering and loss. While previous studies have examined stress and burnout among palliative care nurses, little is known about their lived emotional experiences and coping strategies. This study employs a phenomenological approach to explore the emotional experiences of palliative care nurses and their adaptive mechanisms. Through in-depth interviews with nurses in palliative care units, the findings reveal that emotional attachment to patients, moral distress, and inadequate institutional support are key challenges they face. However, peer support, faith-based coping strategies, and professional commitment enable them to navigate these emotional burdens. The results underscore the need for structured psychological support and institutional interventions to sustain the emotional well-being of nurses in palliative care. Future research should explore longitudinal approaches to assess the long-term impact of resilience strategies and institutional policies on palliative care professionals.



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INTRODUCTION

Palliative care is a critical aspect of healthcare that focuses on improving the quality of life for patients with life-limiting illnesses (Bacigalupe dkk., 2020). It encompasses not only physical symptom management but also emotional, psychological, and spiritual support for both patients and their families. The increasing prevalence of chronic and terminal illnesses has heightened the importance of palliative care in contemporary healthcare systems (C. Monte-Rubio dkk., 2022). Nurses, as primary caregivers in palliative settings, play a crucial role in ensuring that patients experience dignity and comfort during their final stages of life.

Despite the acknowledged significance of palliative care, nurses often encounter substantial emotional and psychological burdens when providing end-of-life care (Ciaccio dkk., 2021). The nature of their work necessitates prolonged exposure to suffering, grief, and loss, which can lead to emotional exhaustion, compassion fatigue, and moral distress. Existing literature highlights that nurses in palliative settings frequently struggle with maintaining emotional resilience while ensuring compassionate care for their patients (Pereira et al., 2020). While extensive studies have explored the physiological aspects of palliative care, fewer have examined the profound emotional experiences of nurses working in this field, particularly within the Indonesian healthcare context.

Previous research has largely focused on interventions aimed at enhancing palliative care services, such as pain management protocols, interdisciplinary team approaches, and patient-centered care models (Concannon dkk., 2024). However, there remains a critical gap in understanding the subjective experiences of nurses who navigate the complexities of palliative care daily. The phenomenological approach provides a valuable framework for capturing these lived experiences, allowing for an

exploration of the deep emotional and psychological challenges nurses face and how they construct meaning from their roles.

This study aims to bridge this knowledge gap by exploring the emotional experiences of nurses in palliative care units (de Moura dkk., 2020). By employing a phenomenological lens, the study seeks to uncover the essence of their experiences, shedding light on the coping mechanisms they adopt and the broader implications for healthcare policies and institutional support systems. Through an in-depth examination of these experiences, the study contributes to a more holistic understanding of the challenges and support structures needed to sustain the emotional well-being of palliative care nurses.

The study of lived experiences in healthcare, particularly in palliative care settings, has emerged as an essential domain of inquiry (Haeyen & Dimaggio, 2024). Research on nurses' emotional responses to end-of-life care has highlighted the significance of subjective experiences in shaping their professional and personal well-being. However, traditional empirical approaches often fail to capture the complexity and depth of these experiences, necessitating methodological frameworks that prioritize meaning-making and personal narratives.

One of the primary challenges in studying the emotional experiences of nurses in palliative care is the methodological limitation of quantitative research, which predominantly relies on structured surveys and statistical analyses. While these methods provide valuable insights into patterns and trends, they lack the depth required to understand how nurses construct and interpret their experiences in emotionally charged environments (Li dkk., 2022). The richness of human emotions, especially in contexts involving grief and loss, cannot be fully captured through numerical data alone.

Given these challenges, phenomenological inquiry offers a compelling approach for exploring the intricate emotional landscapes of nurses engaged in palliative care. Phenomenology focuses on uncovering the essence of lived experiences by prioritizing the subjective perspectives of individuals. This methodological choice is particularly relevant for examining the emotional toll of palliative care nursing, as it allows for a deeper engagement with how nurses make sense of their interactions with terminally ill patients, cope with grief, and navigate moral distress.

Previous studies that have employed phenomenology in palliative care research have provided valuable insights into the emotional and psychological dimensions of caregiving. However, research remains limited in the Indonesian context, where cultural, religious, and institutional factors significantly influence the experiences of palliative care nurses. By situating this study within a phenomenological framework, a more nuanced understanding of the emotional burdens, resilience strategies, and support systems can be achieved.

Through this approach, the study aims to extend existing knowledge by offering an in-depth exploration of how Indonesian palliative care nurses experience and interpret their roles. This understanding is critical for informing policies and institutional interventions that support nurses' emotional well-being and enhance the overall quality of palliative care services.

Although various strategies have been implemented to support palliative care nurses, existing approaches largely focus on practical interventions such as training programs, stress management workshops, and interdisciplinary support teams. While these efforts are beneficial, they primarily address surface-level concerns and fail to capture the nuanced, lived experiences of nurses who routinely face death, grief, and moral dilemmas in their practice.

Quantitative research has provided valuable insights into the prevalence of emotional exhaustion, burnout, and stress among palliative care nurses. However, it falls short in capturing the depth of personal meaning, coping mechanisms, and the evolving emotional states these professionals experience. Numerical data and standardized survey instruments often fail to articulate the full complexity of the emotional and psychological challenges nurses face in end-of-life care settings.

Given these limitations, there remains a critical gap in understanding how palliative care nurses perceive, interpret, and assign meaning to their emotional experiences. The lack of qualitative, phenomenological research in this field restricts the ability to develop holistic and contextually relevant interventions that truly resonate with the emotional realities of these healthcare professionals.

By adopting a phenomenological approach, this study seeks to fill this gap by providing a rich, narrative-driven understanding of the emotional landscape of palliative care nursing. This method allows for the exploration of personal experiences in their full complexity, offering insights that are essential for developing meaningful institutional support systems and policies that enhance nurses' emotional well-being and resilience.

Existing studies on palliative care have largely examined nurses' stress levels, coping strategies, and emotional burnout through quantitative methods. While these approaches provide statistical insights, they fail to capture the depth of personal narratives and the ways in which nurses construct meaning from their experiences. Previous qualitative studies have made significant contributions by highlighting aspects of moral distress and emotional exhaustion, yet there remains a lack of comprehensive research that fully explores the subjective lived experiences of nurses in palliative care settings, particularly in Indonesia.

To address this gap, this study employs a phenomenological approach, which is uniquely suited for understanding the intricate emotional and psychological dimensions of palliative care nursing. By prioritizing subjective experiences, this research aims to uncover how nurses navigate their emotions, cope with the demands of end-of-life care, and find meaning in their professional roles. The phenomenological method allows for an in-depth exploration of these themes, providing a richer and more nuanced perspective than traditional research approaches.

This article is structured to guide readers through the study in a logical sequence. The introduction presents the research background and rationale, followed by a detailed discussion of the phenomenological methodology. The subsequent sections describe the data collection and analysis processes, ensuring methodological rigor. The findings section presents key themes derived from nurses' narratives, which are then discussed in relation to existing literature. The article concludes with implications for practice and policy, highlighting the necessity of institutional support to sustain nurses' emotional well-being in palliative care settings.

RESEARCH METHODS

Study Design

This study adopted a phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences of nurses providing palliative care to terminally ill patients (Liang dkk., 2021). The phenomenological method was chosen to capture the depth of emotional and psychological challenges encountered by nurses, allowing an in-depth understanding of their subjective experiences. The focus of this approach was to explore the essence of nurses' emotional responses and coping mechanisms within the context of palliative care. A hermeneutic phenomenological framework was applied to interpret the meanings embedded within their narratives, facilitating a comprehensive exploration of their emotional landscapes.

Participants

Participants in this study consisted of 10 registered nurses working in palliative care units in type B and C hospitals in Indonesia. Selection was conducted through purposive sampling to ensure that participants had direct experience in caring for terminally ill patients. Inclusion criteria required that nurses had a minimum of three years of experience in palliative care and actively engaged in patient care during the study period. Nurses who were on leave or had administrative roles without direct patient contact were excluded. The demographic composition of participants varied in age, gender, and professional background, enriching the diversity of perspectives captured in this study.

Data Collection

Data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews conducted in a private and comfortable environment to ensure openness in responses (Mejia dkk., 2024). Each interview lasted between 45 and 90 minutes and was audio-recorded with participants' consent. The interview protocol

included open-ended questions designed to elicit personal experiences, emotional responses, and coping strategies related to palliative care. Observations of nurses' interactions with patients and colleagues were also conducted to provide contextual validation of their narratives. Reflexive notes were maintained to capture non-verbal cues and situational dynamics during the interviews.

Data Analysis

The collected data were analyzed using the Colaizzi method, a systematic phenomenological approach that ensures the credibility of findings. Transcriptions were first reviewed for accuracy, followed by the identification of significant statements that reflected core experiences. These statements were then categorized into themes, capturing recurring patterns across participants. Thematic clusters were formed, and rich descriptions of the phenomenon were developed, supported by direct participant quotations. NVivo software was utilized to facilitate the coding and thematic organization of qualitative data.

Ethics

Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the relevant institutional review board. Informed consent was secured from all participants before data collection, ensuring their voluntary participation. Anonymity and confidentiality were maintained by assigning pseudonyms to all participants, and data were securely stored to prevent unauthorized access. The study adhered to the ethical guidelines of the Declaration of Helsinki, ensuring respect for the dignity and well-being of participants.

RESULTS

Emotional Bonding with Terminal Patients

One of the most profound themes that emerged from the interviews was the deep emotional connection nurses developed with terminal patients. Many participants described the relationships they formed as deeply personal, transcending the traditional caregiver-patient dynamic. This emotional attachment made the eventual loss of patients particularly painful. One participant shared:

"Caring for terminal patients is not just about providing medical support; it feels like walking with them on their final journey. When they pass away, it leaves a deep void in my heart."

This sentiment was echoed by several other nurses who acknowledged that despite their professional training, the inevitability of death never became routine. The emotional weight of repeated patient losses was a recurring challenge, contributing to the psychological burden they experienced.

Psychological Burden and Moral Distress

The psychological burden of working in palliative care was another dominant theme. Many nurses described experiencing moral distress, especially when family members refused palliative interventions that could have eased patients' suffering. Some felt powerless when witnessing patients endure prolonged pain due to decisions made by their families. One nurse reflected:

"It is heartbreaking when we know that certain interventions could bring comfort, but we are bound by the family's decisions. It feels like watching someone suffer when you know you could have helped."

Moral distress was further compounded by the constant exposure to death and dying, leading to feelings of helplessness and emotional exhaustion. The inability to save patients despite their best efforts often led to feelings of guilt and self-doubt.

Coping Strategies in Managing Emotional Stress

Given the emotional intensity of their work, nurses employed various coping strategies to manage stress. Most participants emphasized the importance of peer support, where sharing experiences with colleagues provided emotional relief. One participant noted:

"Talking to my colleagues is my way of coping. They understand what I go through because they experience the same pain. Sometimes, just knowing that I am not alone makes a difference."

Religious and spiritual practices were also cited as crucial coping mechanisms. Many nurses turned to prayer, meditation, or religious discussions as a way to find solace. A participant expressed:

"Every time I feel overwhelmed, I pray. It helps me find peace and reminds me that what I do is part of a bigger purpose."

Family support was another significant factor, with several nurses highlighting how spending time with loved ones helped them decompress from the emotional weight of their work.

Limited Psychosocial Support from Institutions

A common concern among participants was the lack of institutional psychosocial support. Many nurses felt that their emotional well-being was overlooked, with little to no structured psychological assistance provided by their healthcare institutions. One participant lamented:

"We are expected to be strong, but no one asks how we are coping. There are no regular counseling sessions or mental health check-ins, even though we deal with death almost every day."

The absence of formal psychological support meant that nurses relied heavily on informal peer networks for emotional resilience. Some institutions had debriefing sessions after patient deaths, but these were infrequent and often not prioritized due to workload constraints.

The findings highlight the deeply personal and emotionally demanding nature of palliative care nursing. Nurses form profound bonds with their patients, making the experience of loss particularly difficult. The moral distress arising from ethical dilemmas further amplifies their emotional burden. While nurses employ various coping strategies, the lack of institutional psychosocial support remains a pressing concern. These experiences underscore the need for better emotional support mechanisms within healthcare institutions to ensure the well-being of palliative care nurses.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study reveal that nurses in palliative care units experience profound emotional connections with their patients, often leading to grief, moral distress, and resilience challenges (Reilly dkk., 2023). These findings directly address the research questions by illuminating the subjective emotional landscapes of palliative care nurses and providing a deeper understanding of their coping mechanisms.

The results contribute to existing knowledge by demonstrating how emotional attachment, ethical dilemmas, and institutional support shape nurses' experiences (Stanciu dkk., 2023). These insights extend previous studies by offering a phenomenological perspective on the nuanced emotional burden faced by palliative care professionals.

The study aligns with and expands upon existing literature by reinforcing the significance of emotional resilience and moral distress in palliative care nursing (Taylor dkk., 2019). While prior research has focused on stress management and burnout, this study highlights the lived experiences that underpin these phenomena, emphasizing the need for tailored psychological support.

Explanation of Findings Implications

The findings of this study provide important implications for nursing practice, healthcare institutions, and policy development in palliative care (Tradigo dkk., 2020). The emotional burden experienced by nurses underscores the necessity of institutional support systems, such as structured debriefing sessions and psychological counseling. Furthermore, the resilience strategies employed by nurses indicate the significance of peer support and faith-based coping mechanisms in managing emotional distress. Understanding these experiences can guide the development of targeted interventions that foster emotional well-being among palliative care nurses and enhance the quality of patient care.

Study Limitations

Despite its contributions, this study has certain limitations. The sample size, while sufficient for a phenomenological inquiry, may limit the generalizability of findings to broader populations. Additionally, cultural factors unique to Indonesian healthcare settings may influence the way nurses experience and articulate their emotions (Yuan dkk., 2024). The reliance on self-reported narratives introduces potential biases, as participants may have filtered their experiences based on social desirability or memory recall limitations. Future research could address these limitations by incorporating longitudinal studies and expanding the scope to include diverse cultural contexts.

Prospective Statement for Future Research

Building on the findings of this study, future research should explore interventions that effectively mitigate emotional distress among palliative care nurses (Zheng dkk., 2022). Investigating the long-term impact of institutional support programs and peer-based coping strategies could provide valuable insights into sustainable well-being practices. Furthermore, cross-cultural comparisons of palliative care nursing experiences could enhance global understanding and inform culturally responsive support mechanisms. Expanding phenomenological research in this domain will continue to refine best practices in palliative care and strengthen the emotional resilience of healthcare professionals.

CONCLUSION

This study explored the emotional experiences of palliative care nurses, revealing profound psychological challenges and coping mechanisms employed in their professional roles. The findings highlight the emotional burden, moral distress, and resilience strategies that shape their experiences in end-of-life care settings. By applying a phenomenological approach, this research provides a deeper understanding of how nurses navigate grief, ethical dilemmas, and institutional constraints while ensuring compassionate care for terminal patients. These insights contribute to the broader discourse on nursing well-being, emphasizing the need for enhanced institutional support and psychosocial interventions. Although limited to a specific cultural and institutional context, the study lays the groundwork for further research into cross-cultural nursing experiences and tailored mental health programs. Future studies should expand on these findings by incorporating longitudinal approaches to assess the long-term impact of emotional resilience strategies.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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