The involvement of relatives in the care of patients in medical settings in Australia and Saudi Arabia - an ethnographic study

Submitted by

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A thesis submitted for the requirement of the Doctor of Philosophy degree

Faculty of Health Sciences

School of Nursing

2016

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Declaration

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Acknowledgment

First I would like to thank Allah almighty for accepting my prayers and making my dream come true. Alhamdulillah for all the help and strength I gained from Allah through prayers.

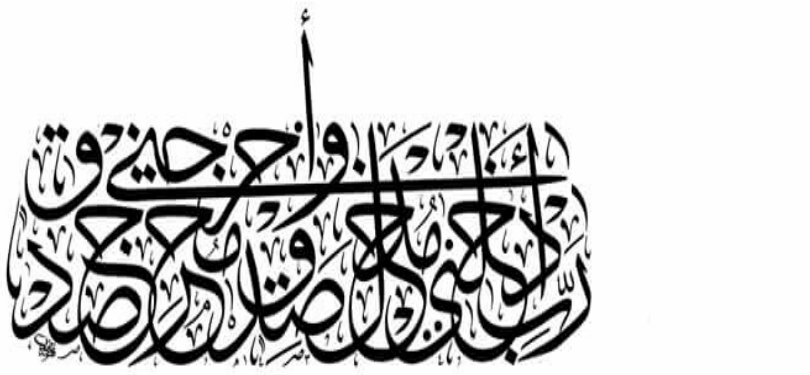
Words are not enough to express my appreciation to my supervisor Associate Professor Judy Magarey. Thank you, Judy, for your patience throughout this process. I have been inspired by your meticulous attention to detail and I have gained much knowledge from your comments and criticism. Thank you for listening to me and being so kind. I'm grateful to my co-supervisor Professor Alison Kitson for the support and guidance she gave me throughout my study period. Thank you Alison for believing in my ability to make a difference in research and thank you for your invitation to be part of fundamentals of care conferences. Thank you both for the discussions that helped to shape this thesis.

I'm highly grateful to my father Hamoud and mother Fatima for helping me to make this opportunity to further my education happen and for encouraging me to make a difference in my life; I appreciate your several visits during this time, thank you for your unconditional love and prayers. I would like also to take this opportunity to thank all my sisters and brothers. Thank you, my guardian angles for your visits, also for the day and late night discussions. I missed you all. I would like to acknowledge the support of close friends who shared with me their experiences and helped to keep me going throughout this journey.

I would like to extend my gratitude to my copy editor, Ms Rachel Judd for the thorough work and professional editing. My warm thanks are forwarded to all participants in the Australian and Saudi settings, from nurses, patients and relatives. Thank you for being helpful and making this study happen.

I also want to forward my regards and thankfulness to King Khalid University for giving me the opportunity to further my education and for supporting me financially. I have been privileged to study at the University of Adelaide and to be part of the wonderful Nursing School. I would like to thank the School for the help and the support during all stages of my study.

Thank you Australia for being so beautiful and such a welcoming place; you will be in my heart always.



Abstract

Relatives play an essential role in looking after patients in hospitals and help to improve quality of care in many ways. Currently, hospital policies acknowledge the role relatives play as partners in the healthcare sector; their role is also encouraged through the 'family and patient centred care' model. The role of relatives as advocates is a key element in critical health settings, where patients need help from family members to make decisions regarding their treatment. However, some healthcare professionals see a relative's presence in hospital as a threat to a patient's autonomy. Additionally, there is little known about how nurses and relatives respond to the involvement of relatives in patient care in a healthcare context, and the impact of their participation on quality of care and the fundamentals of care. The aim of this study was to explore the role relatives play in the care of patients in medical settings in Australia and Saudi Arabia and to understand the nature of this involvement. This is an ethnographic study based on an interpretive paradigm. The study was conducted in acute hospital medical wards, one in Australia and another in Saudi Arabia. Data collection was carried out over a six month period, three months spent in each setting. The Spradley data analysis framework was adopted to analyse the results of this ethnographic inquiry (Spradley, 1979, 1980). These indicated that there was no shared understanding of the role of relatives. In both fields nurses and relatives faced ongoing ambiguity about the role relatives should play in the hospital environment and nurses were challenged by the unpredictability of relatives' participation in patient care. The fear of taking responsibility and uncertainty about their responsibility towards relatives led nurses to take a varied and individualised approach to the involvement in patient care. Relatives were unclear about how to behave in the role, what the needs of patients were, and whether they were contributing to care and this increased their frustration. Lack of guidelines around the role relatives play in patient care affected the interaction between relatives and nurses and their ability to work in partnership.