

CARING AND COPING WITH DEATH IN INTENSIVE CARE

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Objective:

To understand how intensive care staff deliver care to dying patients and the strategies they use to cope with repeated exposure to death.

Methods:

This UK study employed ethnographic methods. 14 patient centred case studies were completed in 2 general adult intensive care units, comprising 409 hours of participant observation, documentary analyses and a series of retrospective interviews with patient's doctors and nurses (n=17), and next of kin (n=14).

Results:

In caring for dying patients intensive care staff emphasize the care and presentation of the dying person's body and the disclosure of appropriate information to companions. Doctors and nurses take on different but complementary roles in disclosing information about imminent death. The success of strategies employed by staff to cope personally with death depend on:

Separation of professional and personal identities.

Achieving a balance between the different orientations of medicine and nursing.

Negotiation of death in this way underpins the 'occupational integrity' of intensive care staff.

Discussion and conclusion:

The intensive care unit is an important site within which to improve the quality of end of life care. Intensive care staff have a clear understanding of the components of good palliative care but find it exhausting to deliver this because of environmental constraints and the varied trajectories of dying with which they are faced. Supporting teamwork and providing opportunities for critical reflection can aid their work.