Abstracts

37. AUSTRALIAN EMERGENCY NURSES’ EXPERIENCES OF WORK, USING NEEDLELESS CONNECTORS DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC. A QUALITATIVE STUDY

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The COVID-19 pandemic has challenged health care professionals and changed our approach to the delivery of patient care. Experience during the COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the need to better understand and manage the challenges relating to the use of personal protective equipment (PPE) experienced by frontline health care workers.

Aims: To explore and describe nurses’ experience with the use of personal protective equipment in the Emergency Department (ED), during the COVID-19 pandemic in Australia.

Design: A qualitative explorative descriptive design was used.

Methods: Participants were 24 nurses (clinical and managerial). One focus group and 21 individual semi-structured interviews were conducted between January and April 2022. Qualitative descriptive thematic analysis was used to identify themes, elicit meaning and communicate findings using Braun and Clarke’s six steps as the guiding framework.

Results: Five main themes identified: (i) The shifting ground of the COVID pandemic response, (ii) Disconnect between the ED team and organisational leaders (iii) Working in PPE causes exhaustion, physical discomfort and injury (iv) Challenges providing safe patient care (v) Discrete event with timeless consequences.

Conclusion: This study evidenced an array of adverse effects and staff concerns arising from use of personal protective equipment during the COVID-19 pandemic response in 2020-22. Experiences during the pandemic highlighted a long standing and urgent need to bolster the nurse workforce particularly in emergency nursing. Innovation is needed in PPE design to increase both protection from novel pathogens and user comfort.

Keywords: Registered Nurse, Emergency Department, Personal Protective Equipment, COVID-19 pandemic, Australia

38. IMPLEMENTATION OF A SUCCESSFUL STATEWIDE FIT TESTING PROGRAM: BREAKING DOWN THE CHALLENGES AND BARRIERS

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Background: Since its emergence, millions of people have acquired and died from SARS-CoV-2 infections. A key controversy has been how to protect health workers (HWs) when there is ambiguous evidence on the adequacy of personal protective equipment and fit testing. Operationalizing these requirements was very challenging as fit testing had not been routine practice in New South Wales (NSW) Health. Furthermore, it is impractical to fit test 140,000 HWs in the middle of a pandemic.

Method: A multidisciplinary Respiratory Protection Program (RPP) board was convened with representatives from work health and safety, workplace relations and clinical teams along with legal and union delegates with the aim of providing strategic advice and guidance on implementation, monitoring, and outcomes of RPP.

Results: Local implementation was led by Infection Prevention and Control and by experienced nurses and work health and safety experts. The program included the more complex aspects of managing HWs who are unable to pass a fit test due to religious, cultural, or medical conditions. During 2021 NSW Health performed 234,499 fit tests on 84,685 HWs with overall, 98% of HWs (n=83210) achieving a fit test pass, demonstrating the success of the program.

Conclusion: Fit testing is now well established and continues as new staff enter the workforce, new respirators become available as well as repeat testing for those many frontline HWs who were fit tested early in the pandemic. The RPP board is progressing with an evaluation of the program to determine its impact, effectiveness, and sustainability in coming years.