

“Like fighting a fire with a water pistol”: a qualitative study of the work experiences of critical care nurses during the COVID-19 pandemic

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Publication

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Abstract

Aim

To understand the experience of critical care nurses during the COVID-19 pandemic, through the application of the Job-Demand-Resource model of occupational stress.

Design

Qualitative interview study.

Methods

Twenty-eight critical care nurses (CCN) working in ICU in the UK NHS during the COVID-19 pandemic took part in semi-structured interviews between May 2021 and May 2022. Interviews were guided by the constructs of the Job-Demand Resource model. Data were analysed using framework analysis.

Results

The most difficult job demands were the pace and amount, complexity, physical and emotional effort of their work. Prolonged high demands led to CCN experiencing emotional and physical exhaustion, burnout, post-traumatic stress symptoms and impaired sleep. Support from colleagues and supervisors was a core job resource. Sustained demands and impaired physical and psychological well-being had negative organizational consequences with CCN expressing increased intention to leave their role.

Conclusions

The combination of high demands and reduced resources had negative impacts on the psychological well-being of nurses which is translating into increased consideration of leaving their profession.

Implications for the Profession and/or Patient Care

The full impacts of the pandemic on the mental health of CCN are unlikely to resolve without appropriate interventions.

Impact

Managers of healthcare systems should use these findings to inform: (i) the structure and organization of critical care workplaces so that they support staff to be well, and (ii) supportive interventions for staff who are carrying significant psychological distress as a result of working during and after the pandemic. These changes are required to improve staff recruitment and retention.

Reporting Method

We used the COREQ guidelines for reporting qualitative studies.

Patient and Public Contribution

Six CCN provided input to survey content and interview schedule. Two authors and members of the study team (T.S. and S.C.) worked in critical care during the pandemic.

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