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

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Aims: To explore the role relatives play in the care of patients in medical ward settings in Australia and Saudi Arabia and to understand the nature of this involvement.

Background: There is little known about how nurses and relatives respond to the involvement of relatives in patient care and the impact of the participation on the quality of care. Previous studies have focused on settings such as critical care and paediatrics where relatives' involvement as advocates is mostly acknowledged and accepted.

Design: The study used a qualitative ethnographic approach based on an interpretive paradigm.

Methods: Data collection was carried out in medical settings in two major hospitals; one in Australia and another in Saudi Arabia. Data were collected by observations and interviews over a six-month period with three months spent in each setting.

Results: 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 nurses' fear of taking responsibility and uncertainty about the relatives' role led them to take varied and individualised approaches to the involvement of relatives in patient care. Relatives were unclear about how to behave in the role, what the needs of patients were and whether they were contributing positively to care and this resulted in frustration.

Conclusion: The results show that ambiguity regarding the role of relatives led to problems in patient care such as safety concerns and conflict with nurses.

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