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Capacity for care: what influences nursing staff capacity to provide relational care for patients with dementia on the acute hospital ward?

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Research findings continue to indicate that consistently providing a high standard of nursing care for patients with dementia remains elusive. The relational aspects of care in hospital have received particular scrutiny in recent studies with reports identifying ongoing failures. There are now a large number of interventions created to improve relational care for patients with dementia, most of which target the care process with no consideration for the context in which the care is occurring. A more thorough understanding of organisational and unit-level conditions will allow for more tailored interventions that seek to overcome contextual challenges that will inevitably arise within an acute care ward environment. A study exploring these challenges and the impact on nursing staff capacity to provide relational care for people living with dementia on the acute care ward is a gap in the literature well worth addressing. An ethnographic study took place in an NHS Hospital in England consisting of 100 hours of non-participant observations of nursing care and 20 semi-structured interviews with nursing staff across three medical wards for older people. Field notes and transcripts analysed thematically - along with a reflexive journal. A sociotechnical analysis was then used to frame the data. The findings provide an in-depth insight into the contextual factors influencing nursing staff's capacity to give a high quality of relational care. The factors will be discussed in relation to the following work systems components: person, environment, tasks, tools and technologies; along with the component of emotion which has not been considered before. These results also provide recommendations for future interventions with the most significant being that interventions will be most successful if they address the ways in which the care is organised; focusing particularly on team relationships and staff autonomy which seem to have the greatest influence on relational care.

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