



How COVID-19 has impacted / changed strategies Shiftworking Emergency Department (ED) nurses use to mitigate the Effects of Fatigue?

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Background

COVID-19 is the most serious pandemic of the 21st century globally. ED nurses are at the nexus supporting diagnosis, treatment and care of potentially infectious and COVID-19 positive patients.

Aim

To explore how COVID-19 impacted on strategies that shiftworking ED nurses utilise to mitigate the effects of work-related fatigue at work and home.

Methods

Qualitative data was collected in mid-July - September 2020 in Queensland, Australia after the first lockdown in response to COVID-19, as part of a larger longitudinal research project. Free-text responses to non-mandatory open-ended questions from an on-line survey, completed by shiftworking ED nurses around fatigue and recovery, were analysed via thematic coding.

Results

36 shiftworking ED nurses provided 75 free-text responses to two open ended questions: 'how has COVID-19 changed the ways fatigue is mitigated at work?', and 'how has COVID-19 changed the ways fatigue is mitigated at home?'. Three themes were elucidated around COVID-19: i) impacts on shiftworking ED nurses working lives, ii) impacts on strategies to mitigate the effects of fatigue at work and iii) impacts on strategies to mitigate the effects of fatigue at home. COVID-19 perceptibly increased workload and demands on shiftworking ED nurses, creating more fatigue from work, and less time for recovery and support from co-workers. Changes to work arrangements in response to COVID-19 included reduced access to leave and holidays. Strategies to reduce fatigue at home were also impacted by COVID-19. These included reduced access to gyms and family support. However, some nurses stated there were no changes to the strategies utilised to deal with fatigue at work and home due to COVID-19.

How COVID-19 has impacted on shiftworking ED nurses working lives.

"I feel that COVID has increased the effects of fatigue due to the time needed to apply PPE and the stress to ensure you don't breach PPE requirements when nursing each patient. The increased time to Don and Doff PPE has added to all the other tasks and to an already very busy ED".

"The issue with shift working, is taking of annual leave, I have not been able to get holidays during school holidays with my family and that is becoming upsetting and is one aspect that makes you think of changing work places".

How COVID-19 has impacted on how shiftworking ED nurses mitigate the effects of fatigue at work.

"Work has been much busier with covid, I don't get much time to meditate or de-stress".

"Less down time, less support available from other team members due to PPE and isolation rooms, less interactions with friends, more draining work being in full PPE for extended periods of time".

How COVID-19 has impacted on how shiftworking ED nurses mitigate the effects of fatigue at home.

"During lockdown - close of gyms and exercise places, close of relaxation places (massage etc) .

"No more outings which I use on my days off or even catching up with friends".

Discussion

During the pandemic, ED nurses are at a greater risk of exposure to COVID-19 infection in a rapidly changing workplace with increasing work demands, loads, and stressors (1). To meet these greater work demands nurses report working longer days and often under extreme conditions (2). The long term impacts of these workplace stressors and strains increases the risk to nurses' health and wellbeing and threatens the sustainability of the healthcare sector (3). This study describes ways that COVID-19 had impacted on how shiftworking ED nurses mitigate the effects of fatigue at work and at home in their own voices through qualitative enquiry. Some nurses reported no changes in the strategies used to manage fatigue and indicates the individual differences between nurses and how they manage fatigue at home and work. COVID-19 interrupted recovery resources utilised by shiftworking ED nurses against fatigue. These included down time, access to and control over leave entitlements, social support at both work and home, and participating in exercise and other leisure activities.

Conclusions

Shiftworking ED nurses reported that COVID-19 had changed the ways in which they were able to mitigate the effects of fatigue at both work and home. This information provides crucial insight into key aspects of shiftworking ED nurses' working and homes lives, and provides an opportunity for nursing managers and hospitals to consider when managing and organising rostering and resources to support shiftworking ED nurses during a pandemic.

Limitations

Limitations identified identified through the enquiry process were purposive sampling, and the use and subjective analysis of self-report data.

References

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