Reality Shock Revisited: Returning to the Bedside

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Introduction:
The purpose of this pilot study was to explore the experiences of stress, coping, and adaptation of the seasoned registered nurse returning to hospital bedside nursing. The significance of this study addresses the nursing shortage, which has resulted in opportunities for experienced registered nurses to return to direct patient care. The literature reiterates the high prevalence of occupational stress among nurses, contributing to burnout, declines in health status, decreased job satisfaction with intent to leave, all contributing to turnover and workforce losses.

Method(s):
This pilot study using ethnographic qualitative methods, was based on the investigator's personal experience of returning to the bedside after a five year hiatus, and designed to refine the qualitative approach and investigator's skills for a more extensive study. Data collection techniques included participant observations, journaling, and field notes which began upon the investigator's completion of unit orientation and continued until saturation was achieved. Digitally recorded impressions were transcribed by the investigator. Analysis included inductive, deductive and reiterative review of transcribed materials to identify emergent themes and patterns and identify refinements in the methodology.

Results:
The findings in this pilot study revealed perceptions of stress were related to unmet work environment expectations, limited access to equipment, understaffing, extended workdays, computerized documentation, and reduced opportunity for direct one-to-one patient interaction. Coping resources in the workplace were overwhelmed by competitive and concurrent demands. Strategies for self care in the workplace and beyond were essentially non existent.

Discussion:
The results of this pilot study indicate few changes have occurred in the stress and coping experience of hospital bedside nurses since the release of Kramer's Reality Shock in 1974. The socialization, stressors, coping, and impact on self care for the returning experienced registered nurse mirror the novice experience, with the addition of unmet expectations in the professional work environment.

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