

Back to basics: caring trajectories and opportunities in the emergency department

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Dear Editor,

The Italian nursing community has been engaged in a lively debate regarding specialized competencies for some time now. This discussion has led to the emergence of dedicated movements, reflections on professional development opportunities, and controversies among different professional communities. While the authors remain skeptical about the widespread applicability of so-called "specialized competencies," they are nonetheless enthusiastic supporters of the concept. This is despite the evident imbalance caused by the lack of career progression in clinical practice, which is well-structured in more advanced countries such as Spain and the United Kingdom but remains insufficiently addressed by the new Collective Agreement. Despite significant differences in educational backgrounds and training, professionals have been treated equally in terms of responsibilities and remuneration for decades.

This broad premise is necessary to emphasize the importance of fundamental nursing skills, which have been unjustly overlooked—often to the detriment of patient care—in the relentless pursuit of specialized competencies. However, the strength of a professional, much like that of a building, depends on well-structured foundations before any expansion of skills.^{1,2} An insightful discussion paper by Australian nurses Kate Curtis and Taneal Wiseman, published in two parts in the *Australasian Emergency Nursing Journal*,^{3,4} highlighted the importance of essential nursing care in emergency departments. Communication with patients, families, and staff, as well as fundamental physical aspects like hygiene, positioning, and nutrition, significantly impact patient outcomes and satisfaction. The increasing average Length of Stay and the growing reliance on waiting and treatment areas in emergency departments—driven by extensive diagnostic testing and the rising phenomena of boarding and overcrowding—necessitate a renewed focus on nursing care, often overlooked in fast-track pathways. Recognizing socio-assistive issues and coordinating appropriate follow-up activities remain essential pillars of emergency nursing.

Trajectories of caring in emergency department

Nurses play a crucial role in addressing fundamental patient care needs throughout the emergency department journey, particu-

larly through the domain of non-technical skills. However, these behavioral and less visible competencies are often underemphasized by nurses, who may instead focus on "stories of neglect rather than of care".⁵ It is therefore imperative to identify the core trajectories of caring in emergency settings: one encompassing relational aspects and patient advocacy, and the other focusing on physiological care.

Patient Advocacy and Relationships

Nurses in the emergency department demonstrate relational competence through effective communication, engagement with family needs, and the implementation of appropriate caring practices. This context is well described by an Australian author, Johanne Egan: "The Emergency Department is a melting pot of almost every aspect of humanity. It can be a place of pain, disease, despair, and death [...] It can be a place of deeply meaningful connection, of achievement and joy in learning and teaching".⁶

Patient advocacy initiatives thus represent one of the primary trajectories of nursing care.^{7,8} Developing effective relationships between healthcare providers, patients, and families requires a foundation of proper communication. Ineffective communication not only leads to patient dissatisfaction but can also contribute to clinical errors. Effective strategies include introducing the healthcare provider to the patient, actively involving family members early and continuously, providing clear explanations about procedures and expected waiting times, and reinforcing information to ensure comprehension. Additionally, addressing non-clinical needs is crucial for promoting a holistic approach to patient care.

Physiological aspects of care

Maintaining the physiological aspects of nursing care is crucial for upholding patient well-being and dignity, even in the fast-paced emergency department setting. Personal hygiene serves not only as a fundamental aspect of comfort but also provides an opportunity to assess the patient's skin and identify any lesions requiring intervention. Cleaning and linen changes are essential in cases of incontinence, sweating, vomiting, or bleeding, while oral and eye care is critical for patients who are unconscious or have impaired mobility. Proper patient positioning is vital in preventing

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immobilization-related complications, such as pressure injuries, particularly in elderly, malnourished, or non-self-sufficient patients. Given the limited padding of stretchers and the prolonged use of immobilization devices, the adoption of appropriate techniques and equipment is crucial.

Ensuring proper nutrition is essential in the emergency department. For patients who are unconscious or awaiting procedures, alternative feeding methods may be necessary. For all other patients, prioritizing the restoration of adequate nutritional status and promoting self-sufficiency in eating should be a focus. Additionally, providing assistance with elimination functions while preserving the dignity and privacy of patients, even those who typically maintain continence but may experience temporary difficulties due to their acute condition, is crucial.

Future opportunities

Caring competencies in emergency settings are a cornerstone of patient-centered care in critical situations. Caring extends beyond technical dimensions to include a relational component, often invisible but essential.⁹ In the emergency department context, some essential nursing responsibilities do not receive the appropriate cultural recognition. This disparity can result in the neglect of fundamental caring components that are vital for comprehensive, patient-centered care. Consequently, it is crucial to re-evaluate the foundations of nursing practice, restoring the significance of aspects that are frequently undervalued or disregarded in routine care. Only by adopting this renewed emphasis can nursing care be fully effective, ultimately enhancing both patient experiences and clinical outcomes.

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