

Night Nurses

Introduction

Night Nurses staff the hospital floors when most of the world is asleep. They remain awake when even the doctors are asleep, and become the eyes and ears of the hospital floors. Typically working a 12-hour shift from 7 p.m. to 7 a.m., Night Nurses make the necessary adjustments to meet the physical, psychological, and personal demands that come with a nocturnal lifestyle. Along with the commitment to caring for the ill in the wee hours of the night has come a distinct subculture which they celebrate and take great pride in, both on and off the hospital floor.

My fieldwork follows the Night Nurses of the Kapiolani Hospital Pediatric Intensive Care Unit (PICU). It is here that I observed the fascinating blend of professionalism and comraderie that defines the subculture of Night Nurses. Through fieldwork observation and informal interviews, I was able to gain insight into the professions and personal lives of these individuals.

Because it is my aspiration to become a nurse, this project was of great significance to me. It was a rare opportunity to observe and hear firsthand from the nurses their experiences and perspectives about their jobs and lives on a night shift. While I have never been inclined to work a night shift, I have always found the prospect of it to be fascinating, simply because it is such a break from my normal schedule. I am greatly obliged to all of the nurses who let me into their unit and so graciously shared a part of their lives with me.

Methods

I visited the PICU three times during the night shift, for four hours at a time. In order to observe the flow of the entire shift, I staggered my visits so that I could see each part of the night. On Saturday, March 18, 2006 I visited from 8 p.m. – 12 a.m.; on Friday, March 10, 2006 I was there from 12 a.m. – 4 a.m.; and on Monday, March 20, 2006 I was there from 6 a.m. to 7:45 a.m. The reason I stayed beyond the end of the Night shift on March 20, 2006 was to get a feel for what the Day Shift was like.

With permission from the Charge Nurse, I sat at the Nurses' Station during most of my visits. Because this is where the telephones, computers, patient monitors, and clerks are located, it is the hub of activity throughout the shift. Because most of the patients' rooms, and the patients themselves can be seen from the Nurses' Station, it was a strategic location from which to observe the Nurses at work without getting in the way.

While my observations were geared at obtaining information on the pace, routine, and comraderie of Night Nurses, much of my information on the Night Nurse subculture came from interviews. I conducted interviews on my second visit, after the Nurses were familiar with me and my reason for being there. The interviews were done in person and structured formally, but ended up being informal and at times, not individual but collective. The interviews were valuable because they allowed the nurses to share with me information I did not know I did not know, and that I couldn't have observed on my own in such a short period of time. At the request of the floor manager, informants signed waiver forms prior to being interviewed (see attached). I conducted a total of 6 interviews, which were done on nurses' "down" time. The interviews were done with great enthusiasm, because of the great pride the nurses have in being night workers. All of my informants were dedicated Night Nurses, who did not intend to switch back to the day shift.

To protect their identity, all informants have been given false names.

Night Nurses: Professional Aspects

On a typical night in the PICU, there are 12 nurses on duty. It is a 14 bed unit, which means each nurse has 1 – 2 patients. While the number of nurses on the night shift is similar to those on the day shift, the duties and pace of work differ significantly. Most notably, there are less procedures being done, which means there is less traffic by specialists on the floor. Between 7 p.m. and 11 p.m., the Nurses are busy with baths, bed changes, tracheotomy tie changes, and weights. The nurses describe the hours between 11 p.m. and 5 a.m. as "down time," although this does not mean that there is no work to do. Because their patients are very ill, they must keep a close watch on them. The Night Nurses explained that because there are less Doctors present during the night shift, they must be autonomous and extra vigilant in their care. For this reason, they claim that the teamwork and comraderie on the Night Shift is much greater than during any other shift.

The interaction of the nurses on the Night Shift revealed much about teamwork and interpersonal relationships. Early in the shift and between their duties, the Nurses hugged and greeted each other enthusiastically. Each nurse made it a point to know who was assigned to which patient, so that they could be of support to one another. They often worked in pairs, seeking one another out for assistance with patients. There was never any hesitation on the part of anyone to stop their charting and help the nurse in need. During my stay, I witnessed two nurses taking turns to provide what they called “cuddle time” for a patient who missed his parents and had difficulty sleeping.

Through the duration of the shift, there was always boisterous conversation and laughter at the nurses’ station, half of which was unrelated to work itself. On the other hand, there was abundant conversation, or what they openly referred to as gossip about happenings on the Day Shift. They giggled and rolled each other around the Nurse’s Station on their chairs. To add to the action, a nurse who chose to go by the name of Ishkabibel routinely recruited takers for Breakfast and Beer at the end of the shift.

Eating is also a major part of the Night Nurse culture. The nurses emphasized that it keeps them awake and gives them something to do during down time. Potlucks are common, as is the practice of tasting each other’s food and sharing recipes. Snacking is constant, and before the start of the day shift, the nurses are careful to clear the Nurse’s Station of any evidence. While there is a cafeteria available to them, most of the nurses bring their own food and share with one another. During my stay at the PICU, there was a potluck dinner to celebrate the graduation of a new nurse out of her orientation period. The break room was covered with food and desserts, and frequented all night long.

Humor plays a huge role in the culture of Night Nurses. Practical jokes on one another, the doctors, or the neighboring units are regular occurrences that serve as entertainment during down time. Ishkabibel recounted stories of a previous job, where they held I.V. Pole races and set up contraptions in the Doctors’ sleeping quarters to temporarily debilitate the interns. At the PICU, there is an ongoing exchange with the staff of the Emergency Room, involving a hostage Elmo doll. The nurses have kidnapped, blindfolded, and tied up the doll, sending a polaroid down to the Emergency Room. Another joke is the “ding dong ditch,” where nurses from a neighboring unit ring the doorbell to gain access to the PICU, then run away. This reinforced the fact that it was not only the Night Nurses of the PICU who enjoyed humor, but other nurses as well. For entertainment, the screensavers at each of the patients’ bedsides are often changed

from “Avoid Infection: Wash Your Hands,” to other things. At one time, they read, “Avoid Infection: Wash your ass,” and “Avoid Infection: Don’t Sleep With Your Nurse.”

A significant part of the Night Nurse culture is the collective perception of themselves as a minority which is distinctly different from Day Nurses. The two main differences that they identify are teamwork and humor. With a lot of pride, every nurse commented that Night Nurses are more friendly, work more closely together, and value collaboration more than Day Nurses. The reason they gave for this is the lack of support from physicians and other care providers that are only around during the day. During a collective interview, when Janine and Ishkabibel commented, “We know how to work together better because we only have each other. Because we have to be autonomous in our care, we rely on one another,” all the nurses present at the nursing station agreed unanimously. To validate this statement, they rolled their eyes and spoke of tired doctors and interns who slept through pages and calls. Leilani described Night Nurses as “people who must become the doctors’ eyes and ears throughout the night.”

The nurses also stood together in their description of themselves as having more humor than day nurses. Although many of them pointed out that Night Nurses are younger in age because new hires tend to be scheduled at night, most agreed that the night shift seems to attract people who are funnier and enjoy humor more. Alison informed me, “Night Nurses are a different breed. They’re a little weird, or off. Well, you have to be mentally different because you are living two lives.” When the Night Nurses spoke about the Day Nurses, they made faces, chuckled, and mockingly referred to them as “The Divas.” Another explanation for differences in humor was that Day Nurses are more senior people, who are really set in their ways.

Personal Life

Aside from the profession itself, the personal life connected to Night Nurses is a defining feature of this subculture. All nurses agreed that the challenge of balancing their personal lives with a nocturnal schedule was tough. While some claimed that working at night allowed them to spend more time with their families, all of them were preoccupied with the subject of sleep.

Sleep is hard to come by for Night Nurses. It is sacred to them, because it is so hard to get on a regular basis. As Marlene put it, “You never quite feel like a whole person. You spend a lot of time in a daze. You’re just not with it.” About half of them sleep as soon as they get home, while the others stay up until noon before in order to do errands or exercise. Eye patches, ear plugs, and black curtains are cultural artifacts which help with limiting disruptions. Sleeping aids

are frequently used, though not by all, to help the body achieve the same kind of sleep it would get during night hours. When they have more than two consecutive days off, Night Nurses strive to cycle back to a normal schedule, so that they sleep during the night and are awake during the day. They all complain that “people with normal lives” don’t understand or forget their need to sleep, and don’t respect the time they have scheduled for shuteye.

Conclusion

Night Nurses are a distinct subculture both within the hospital and at home among their family and peers. To cope with the late hours which are unnatural for the body, they have developed techniques and drawn upon strengths which allow them to succeed professionally and personally. Teamwork and a sense of humor are key to this culture, because they must rely on each other’s skills when doctors aren’t always around. The humor keeps them entertained and young at heart, and further develops their relationships and comraderie. The shared recognition of themselves as a minority that is significantly differs from the day shift further strengthens their bonds and defines them as unique subculture. At home, Night Nurses must balance the needs of their families with their need for sleep. Sleeping during the day requires accommodations such as eye patches and sleep aides, as well as rules which prevent family and friends from interrupting them.

Attachments:

Interview Consent Form

This interview is part of an ethnographic study on Night Nurses for a Cultural Anthropology class at Windward Community College. Together with field observation, this interview is intended to get an insider’s look at the subculture of Night Nurses. All responses to the questions, as well as informant identity will be kept confidential. Thank you for your participation!

I, _____, agree to this interview on _____, with the understanding that information will be kept confidential; that my identity will be protected; and

that the results of this project will be used for no other purpose than for this Anthropology course.

Ethnography: Night Nurses
Interview

Date: _____

Informant: _____

Describe a typical shift as a night nurse.

What do you like about being a night nurse? Dislike?

How are night nurses different than day nurses? (personality, professional “style,” etc.

Describe what your day looks like when you come off a night shift.

What adaptations have you had to make to your daily routines and lifestyle? (i.e. sleeping patterns, family responsibilities)

When do you sleep? Eat? Do errands?