

An Ethnographic Study of Nursing on a Surgery Ship Providing Humanitarian Care

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the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

under the supervision of

Professor Doug Elliott and Professor Debra Jackson AO

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CERTIFICATE OF ORIGINAL AUTHORSHIP

I, Sonja Ann Dawson, declare that this thesis is submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the award of Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) in the Faculty of Health (Nursing) at the University of Technology Sydney.

This thesis is wholly my own work unless otherwise referenced or acknowledged. In addition, I certify that all information sources and literature used are indicated in the thesis.

This document has not been submitted for qualifications at any other academic institution.

This research is supported by the Australian Government Research Training Program.

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15 January 2021

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My PhD candidature has been a substantial personal journey, one which was birthed much further back than my initial enrolment into the academic program. Yet, on reflection, the PhD candidature is a defined season that is one leg of a journey. To use nautical imagery, this 'leg' has been a voyage through uncharted waters, one that has required frequent recalibration to ensure I remained on the right course. At times, it felt like I could easily be drifting at sea. However, feelings are a poor guide to the truth. I consider it a privilege to have had this opportunity to illuminate a unique aspect of humanitarian nursing and provide in-depth guidance for nurses choosing a similar journey.

The rippling effects of COVID-19 have pushed aside all familiar routines, and we have all had to deviate and adapt significantly from the familiar ways we understood. Nurses, at increased risk to themselves, have made necessary adjustments and have continued to offer humanitarian care in various ways and in 'out-of-the-way' places. It is just what nurses do. It is hard to predict the longer term impact COVID-19 will have on the future of international volunteering; however, one thing is certain. Mercy Ships' mission and vision remain constant—to provide hope and healing in its various forms.

I acknowledge and offer my heartfelt thanks to my fellow travellers who have accompanied me in various ways and means on this research voyage.

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this work to Don and Deyon Stephens, founders of an exceptional life-changing organisation, who, through their remarkable faith and willingness, have left a legacy impacting the lives of so many people, including donors, volunteer crew, patients and their families, and the global community.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ALNAP	Active Learning Network for Accountability and Performance
CASP	Critical Appraisal Skills Programme
CoF	Community of faith
CoP	Community of practice
CoNP	Community of nursing practice
COREQ	Consolidated Criteria for Reporting Qualitative Research
CT	Computerised tomography
FBO	Faith-based organisation
FN	Fieldnotes
IPC	Infection Prevention and Control
IRB	Institutional Review Board
ICU	Intensive care unit
ISC	International Support Center
LMIC	Low- to middle-income country
MCB	Medical capacity building
MeSH	Medicine medical subject heading
MSF	Médecins Sans Frontières
NGO	Nongovernmental organisation
NTEU	National Tertiary Education Union
NCFI	Nurses Christian Fellowship International
ODI	Overseas Development Institute
PACU	Post anaesthesia care unit
PPM	Professional practice model

RN	Registered nurse
STMM	Short-term medical mission
STMT	Short-term medical team
SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
TD	Transformational development
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
VMT	Visiting medical team
YWAM	Youth With A Mission

GLOSSARY

The glossary provides definitions for the following terms that are embedded in this thesis.

Acculturation: Individuals that assume changed behaviour and attitudes (psychological and cultural adjustment) when immersed into a multicultural society, live in close contact with an international team, or who have encountered a different culture (J. W. Berry, 2004).

Humanitarian actors: Those responding to a humanitarian need are described as humanitarian actors (Harvey, 2013). They can be either paid or voluntary. *Actors* is a generic term for people responding to an urgently felt need to relieve suffering and improve health outcomes, usually within the confines of a given role (Beaglehole & Bonita, 2010; Dawson & Homer, 2013).

Humanitarian response: A humanitarian response commonly involves the act of helping others to alleviate suffering and prevent death, where the assistance rendered goes beyond the usual obligations of the responders (Stevermer, 2012). It includes a sense of compassion and assumes an inability of governments and/or society to provide the necessary resources to their citizens (Käpylä & Kennedy, 2014).

Low to middle-income country (LMIC): The World Bank classifies 189 member countries plus 28 other economies into four income groups—low, low-middle, upper-middle, and high—where income is measured in U.S. dollars, using the World Bank Atlas Method of gross national income per capita (The World Bank, 2021). These classifications are updated each fiscal year. The classification provides a broad grouping. Further, it aligns with other indicators such as the Human Development Index, which evaluates the distribution of

education, health, and living standards (United Nations Development Programme, n.d.). Literature also uses the term *developing nation* and a number of alternative terms such as *resource-poor*, *low-resource*, *third world*, and *global south* (Doane, 2014). The terms, often used interchangeably, describe the instability of governance; a high level of debt, poverty; low levels of literacy, education, and technological advancement; poor health infrastructure/outcomes; and dependence on industrialised nations for extra support (Strasser et al., 2016). The common denominator is the inequality of people accessing available global resources (United Nations Development Programme, 2019).

Mission/medical mission: The U.S. National Library of Medicine medical subject heading (MeSH) defines medical missions as “travel by a group of physicians to a foreign country to undertake a special study of short-term duration” (Langowski & Iltis, 2011, p. 71). *Mission* is used in the context of international medical service trips that have neither religious nor military objectives (Mitchell et al., 2012), and the term is now becoming more generic in describing a concept of offering global health. Historically, however, the term *medical mission* has been connected with extending mercy and compassion through health care and simultaneously sharing a message of faith (Panosian & Coates, 2006). It may still be associated with a faith-based (or religious) sense or in a military sense—for example, where the U.S. Navy has provided peacekeeping and medical assistance described as *missions of mercy* (Agazio, 2010; Lagrew et al., 2012; Smith & Smith, 1995; Wegner et al., 2010). The absence of nursing within the definition of medical mission is noted, despite the likely involvement of nurses within service offered through medical mission

projects. The most common acronym for short-term medical teams participating in a medical mission was found to be “STMT” (Lasker et al., 2018, p. 1).

Proselytism: This term refers to sharing the good news of the gospel message from the Bible. Although Mercy Ships is a faith-based organisation, they do not engage in proselytism or recruit those receiving service with manipulation or any contractual agreement. Goods and services are given freely and are not dependent on any response from an individual to believe what they say.

Transformation: A fundamental change used within the confines of this thesis to describe a process of modification, physically or in belief, so that the situation of a patient’s health or functional participation in their family, community, or society achieves a more favourable result. Used in the context of a nurse’s transformation, it relays a change to the nurse’s perspective, leading to a modification—personally, professionally, or both (Boykin & Schoenhofer, 2001).

Transformational development: Transformational development is a framework that focuses on restoring wholeness, not only to individuals but families, communities, and society (C. Roche & Madvig, 2016). Originating from the World Vision organisation, many of the protestant Christian faith-based organisations operate from this theoretical perspective (Myers, 2011), including Mercy Ships.

Volunteer: This term describes people who willingly contribute their knowledge and professional skill without payment of a salary or wage (Sherraden et al., 2008). The concept, as used in this study, may extend to

advocacy, fundraising, and increasing the social profile of organisations through social and/or professional circles.

NOTES ON STYLE

This thesis is presented as a conventional style, formatted to the recommended American Psychological Association's *Publication Manual* (seventh edition).

Key to Transcripts and Fieldnotes

Findings are presented with the following abbreviations and formatting.

Verbatim quotations: Interviewees are deidentified by number (#)—for example, “There is such a spirit of teamwork here (#10)”.

Fieldnotes (FN): These are indicated as FN with # diary entry date—for example, “The dayworker moved around the ward delivering food to each of the patients (FN #14 Oct)”. On occasion, I summarise observations into a table that originated from fieldnote diary entries without noting every individual date.

Explanation of Terms

Participant: Refers to any nurse who was present in the ethnographic field site during the period of data collection.

Interviewee: Refers to those participating nurses who provided written consent to be formally interviewed during the period of data collection.

Interviewees were allocated a number rather than a pseudonym name due to the large number of them.

Nurses: At times, I use the term generically to describe volunteer nurses that work with Mercy Ships.

ABSTRACT

Less than half the world's population has access to essential health services (United Nations, 2020), the majority of whom live in low- to middle-income countries (LMICs; Meara et al., 2015). The inability to access health services denies people a life of dignity. To bridge this current gap in the provision of health care, nongovernmental organisations are responding by deploying specialist, short-term healthcare teams (Ng-Kamstra et al., 2016). Nurses, as the largest group of health professionals, provide care within those teams. Substantial literature is linked to nurses deployed in a disaster response situation, However, there is limited research into nurses' roles within teams meeting a humanitarian response outside that urgent disaster context, and what their contribution brings.

The purpose of this ethnographic study was to explore nursing involvement within humanitarian healthcare provision to generate insight into the area of humanitarian nursing in an acute, short-term, nondisaster context and to extend the research literature surrounding this topic. The study was framed within the context of a faith-based nongovernmental organisation delivering specialist surgery on a civilian hospital ship. The aim was to advance the mission and purpose of humanitarian (nondisaster) nursing, providing a detailed description of the culture of nursing care in that setting.

An interpretivist standpoint, influenced by a social constructivist theoretical position, was taken. Data were collected over 6 months, using participant observation, a reflection of artefacts, and the collective voice of volunteer nurses. Thematic analysis was conducted considering Consolidated Criteria for Reporting Qualitative Research (COREQ) guidelines. Findings

elucidated nursing within the context of a community of nursing practice (CoNP), revealing four major themes: (1) “What drew us here?” (expressions of motivation), (2) “Who we are and how we do what we do” (expressions of engagement), (3) challenges (embracing change), and (4) development (expressions of transformation).

This study contributes new knowledge by describing the culture of nursing and how nurses enact their care in a previously undescribed humanitarian context. Based on the analysis of findings, a professional practice model (PPM) named HHEALED was proposed. An in-depth application of the model was made to the specific organisational context framing the study. Recommendations arising from this study address nurses’ social and professional roles within humanitarian care that could further validate and strengthen policies and programs for the delivery of humanitarian health care for a mobile platform providing specialist surgical care.

DISSEMINATION OF FINDINGS

Peer-Reviewed Publications

Dawson, S., Elliott, D., & Jackson, D. (2017). Nurses' contribution to short-term humanitarian care in low- to middle-income countries: An integrative review of the literature. *Journal of Clinical Nursing*, *26*(23–24), 3950–3961. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jocn.13816>

Dawson, S., Jackson, D., & Elliott, D. (2019). Challenges and reflections from an international, humanitarian, short-term surgical mission on collecting ethnographic data in a remote environment. *Nurse Researcher*, *27*(2), 21–25. <https://doi.org/10.7748/nr.2019.e1627>

Dawson, S., Elliott, D., & Jackson, D. [Manuscript submitted for publication]. Understanding the motivation of nurses volunteering for humanitarian service.

Dawson, S., Elliott, D., & Jackson, D. [Manuscript submitted for publication]. Participation to transformation: Recognising personal and professional growth in nursing through humanitarian service.

Scholarship

Recipient of the 2020 Joan Hardy Post Graduate Nurses Scholarship from National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU).

Nursing Conferences

2020 *A professional practice model (PPM) for nurses working in a faith-based humanitarian nondisaster setting* [Paper presentation]. Nurses Christian Fellowship International (NCFI) World Congress, Colorado, United States (postponed until 2021 due to international travel restrictions).

2018 *Sailing through ethnographic data collection on a hospital ship* [poster presentation]. Sigma 29th International Research Congress, Melbourne, Australia.

2017 *Introducing Mercy Ships* [oral presentation]. Day Surgery Nurses Association Annual Conference, Sydney, Australia.

Seminars

2018 *Sailing through ethnographic data collection* [Doctoral Award Category 5-minute e-poster]. HDR Research Student Forum, University of Technology Sydney (UTS), Australia.

2018 *Qualitative data collection in a remote context* [RAPP Seminar Series]. Avondale University College, Sydney, Australia.

2018 *The love boat* [Joint Faculty 3-minute thesis competition]. Research Student Forum, University of Technology Sydney (UTS), Australia.

2017 *“The love boat”: An ethnography of nursing onboard Mercy Ships* [3-minute thesis competition]. Research Student Forum, University of Technology Sydney (UTS), Australia. Awarded first place.

2017 *An ethnography of nursing on Mercy Ships: A report on my research study* [RAPP Seminar Series]. Avondale University College, Sydney, Australia.

2016 *An ethnography of nursing on Mercy Ships* [Africa Mercy crew meeting]. Benin, West Africa.

2015 *“All at sea”: An ethnographic study of nursing on Mercy Ships*. Research Student Forum, University of Technology Sydney (UTS), Australia.

Media Interviews

- 2017** (4 February). *Foxtel Magazine* interview with Helen Vnuk
<https://www.foxtel.com.au/whats-on/foxtel-insider/nat-geo-people/surgery-ship.html>
- 2017** *The Surgery Ship* (Season 2 premiere). National Geographic People Channel, 8-part series airing weekly, S. Dawson included in Episodes 1 and 7.
- 2017** (11 April). *Question and Answer Panel, Preview*, Episode 1 of The Surgery Ship series, Australian Museum, Sydney.
- 2017** (13 April). ABC Radio National, Amanda Smith [15 min 06 sec]
<http://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/lifematters/why-i-volunteered-as-an-overseas-medic/8441610/>
- 2017** (27 April). Hope 103.2 Radio, *Laura and Duncan Breakfast Show* [7 min 23 sec].
<https://hope1032.com.au/stories/culture/guests-and-artists/2017/surgery-ship-brings-hope-healing-forgotten/>
- 2017** (27 April). ABC Radio Perth, Gillian O'Shaughnessy [7 min 44 sec].
<https://www.abc.net.au/radio/perth/programs/wa-afternoons/working-as-a-volunteer-on-a-mercy-ship/8477216>