

**Failure to Rescue: A Descriptive Study of
the Experience of Nurses in the
Intervention for Patients at Risk in the
Acute Ward Setting.**

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2010.**

Certificate of authorship/originality

I certify that the work in this thesis has not previously been submitted for a degree nor has it been submitted as part of requirements for a degree.

I also certify that the thesis has been written by me. Any help that I have received in my research work and preparation of the thesis itself has been acknowledged. In addition, I certify that all the information sources and literature used are indicated in the thesis.

Signature of Candidate

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Abstract

The research represented in this thesis describes the experience of nurses in the intervention for patients at risk in the acute ward setting. Specifically, the research focusses on ‘failure to rescue’ as a concept which can, and as this research demonstrates, does, result in adverse patient outcomes. It identifies, describes and analyses four distinct elements of this type of failure in the clinical setting: 1) *failure to recognise* the level of risk to the patient; 2) *failure to respond* to the patient’s level of risk; 3) *failure to elevate* patient risk to ensure an appropriate response; and 4) *failure to challenge* a perceived risk to patient safety.

Through the use of patient stories, which describe the failure of the health care system and nursing staff to consistently and effectively intervene for patients at risk, the experience of nurses is analysed and compared to *images* of nurses present in the literature. These images are: the nurse as the ‘ministering angel’; the ‘domestic worker’; the ‘doctor’s handmaiden’; the ‘subordinate professional’; and finally the ‘autonomous professional’. The nurses in this research were viewed in these images by the organisation, the doctors and the nurses themselves. These views, and the reality they create, contribute to the inability of nurses to effectively intervene for patients at risk and pose a considerable threat to patient safety.

The information gathered in this research describes the nurses’ actions, the nurses’ beliefs and the dissonance between the nurses’ actions and beliefs in relation to the intervention for patients at risk. This research makes it apparent that nurses play a vital and important role in ensuring patient safety through the intervention for patients at risk, but at times this role is neither recognised nor understood by both the health care system and the nurses themselves. The research argues that it is this lack of understanding and recognition which presents significant barriers for nurses to intervene consistently and effectively for patients at risk.

Key words:

Failure to rescue, patient safety, deteriorating patient, rapid response, patient risk, case study, focus groups, PDSA, beneficence, nonmaleficence, patients’ advocate, subordinate professional, doctor’s handmaiden, autonomous professional, graded assertiveness.

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Glossary

<i>Angina</i>	Chest pain caused by a lack of oxygen to the heart muscle (angina pectoris). Usually caused by a blockage of the arteries which supply blood to the heart muscle (Anderson, Anderson, & Glanze, 1994).
<i>Aorta</i>	The main blood vessel leaving the heart. Comprises four parts: the ascending aorta, the arch of the aorta, the thoracic portion of the descending aorta, and the abdominal portion of the descending aorta (Anderson et al., 1994).
<i>Cardioversion</i>	The restoration of the heart's normal rhythm by delivery of a synchronised electric shock through two metal paddles placed on the patient's chest. Cardioversion is used to slow the heart rate or restore the heart's normal sinus rhythm when drug therapy is ineffective (Anderson et al., 1994).
<i>CT Scan</i>	Computed Tomography scan (CT) is an X-ray technique that produces a film representing a detailed cross section of tissue structure (Anderson et al., 1994).
<i>ECG (electrocardiogram)</i>	A graphic record produced by an electrocardiograph. The electrocardiograph is a device used for recording the electric activity of the heart muscle in order to detect transmission of the cardiac impulse through the conductive tissues of the muscle. Electrocardiography allows diagnosis of specific cardiac abnormalities (Anderson et al., 1994).
<i>EN</i>	Enrolled Nurse. A person enrolled by the Nurses' and Midwives' Board of New South Wales (NSW Department of Health).
<i>Glasgow coma score</i>	A quick, practical, and standardised system for assessing the degree of conscious impairment in a patient and for the prediction of the duration and ultimate outcome of a coma, primarily in patients with head injuries (Anderson et al., 1994). The score ranges from 3 through to 15, with 3 indicating deep unconsciousness and 15 indicative of someone who is alert, orientated and moving freely.

<i>Hypotension</i>	'Low blood pressure', an abnormal condition in which the blood pressure is not adequate for normal perfusion and oxygenation of the tissues (Anderson et al., 1994).
<i>Hypoxia</i>	An inadequate supply of oxygen to cells in the body (Anderson et al., 1994).
<i>Infarction</i>	A condition which occurs when there is a localised area of tissue death of a vessel or organ in the body due to the absence of oxygen supply.
<i>Medical officer in charge (MOIC)</i>	The medical registrar in charge of managing all medical patients on the wards after hours, including evenings, night duty and weekends.
<i>Metastatic cancer</i>	A secondary cancer that forms in the body as a result of an original (primary) tumour (Anderson et al., 1994). This is also referred, in layman's terms, to cancer which has spread to other areas in the body.
<i>Midazolam</i>	Midazolam hydrochloride, a sedative and hypnotic agent, which is also used as a short-acting sleep inducing agent (MIMS).
<i>Morphine</i>	Morphine sulphate, a narcotic analgesic agent (MIMS), which is primarily used for pain relief.
<i>Mylanta</i>	An antacid, used for the relief of gastric reflux, commonly referred to as heartburn (MIMS).
<i>Myocardial infarction (MI)</i>	The death of a portion of the heart muscle caused by obstruction in one of the arteries in the heart, or inadequate oxygenation to the heart muscle. The obstruction is most often a result of a blood clot or the deposit of fatty tissue caused by high cholesterol.
<i>NOF</i>	The narrow neck of the femur, located in the hip joint.
<i>Not for CPR order</i>	This is an order to instruct clinical staff not to perform cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR) in the event that a patient stops breathing or their heartbeat stops, when it is decided that CPR would not be in the best interest of the patient. The order is formed in consultation with the patient or their family or both.
<i>Oliguria</i>	Low urine output. A diminished capacity to form and pass urine, less than 500 ml in every 24 hours, so that the end products of

	metabolism cannot be excreted efficiently (Anderson et al., 1994).
<i>Pressure ulcers</i>	Also known as decubitus ulcer. It is an inflammation, sore, or ulcer in the skin over a bony prominence. It results from a lack of oxygen supply to the tissues because of prolonged pressure on that part of the body (Anderson et al., 1994).
<i>Rapid AF</i>	Atrial fibrillation (AF) and atrial flutter are abnormal heart rhythms in which the atria, or upper chambers of the heart, are out of synchronisation with the ventricles, or lower chambers of the heart. In rapid atrial fibrillation, the atria "quiver" chaotically and the ventricles beat irregularly (American Heart Association, 2008).
<i>Registrar</i>	A medical officer who: has had at least three years' experience in public hospital service as defined under the award or any lesser period acceptable to the Health Administration Corporation, and, (ii) is appointed as a registrar by a hospital, and,) is occupying a position of registrar in an established position as approved by the Health Administration Corporation (NSW Department of Health, 2008a).
<i>Resident</i>	A medical officer who has obtained full registration (NSW Department of Health, 2008a). Full registration is obtained after the medical officer has satisfactorily completed an intern year.
<i>RN</i>	Registered Nurse. A person registered by the Nurses' and Midwives' Board of New South Wales as a Registered Nurse or a Registered Midwife or both (NSW Department of Health).
<i>Saturation</i>	A measure of the degree to which oxygen is bound to red blood cells. It is expressed as a percentage of the possible limit (Anderson et al., 1994).
<i>Scrub Nurse</i>	A specially trained nurse in the operating suite who directly assists the surgeon performing the operative procedure.
<i>Sepsis</i>	Infection, contamination. The presence of bacteria (bacteremia) or other infectious organisms or their toxins in the blood (septicemia) or in other tissue of the body. Sepsis may be

	associated with clinical symptoms of systemic illness, such as fever, chills, malaise, low blood pressure, and mental status changes. Sepsis can be a life threatening disease calling for urgent and comprehensive care (Anderson et al., 1994).
<i>Serenace</i>	The generic name of this drug is <i>haloperidol</i> . It is a drug used to treat mental illnesses such as schizophrenia and mania, or severe anxiety, tension or excitement or severe agitation, hyperactivity and aggression in patients with mental or emotional illness (MIMS, 2008).
<i>Stoma</i>	An artificial opening of an internal organ on the surface of the body, created surgically, such as a colostomy (Anderson et al., 1994).
<i>Tachycardia</i>	Fast heart rate. A condition in which the heart muscle contracts at a rate greater than 100 beats per minute (Anderson et al., 1994).
<i>TEN</i>	Trainee Enrolled Nurse. A person who is being trained to become an enrolled nurse in a hospital recognised by the Nurses' and Midwives' Board of New South Wales as a training school for enrolled nurses (NSW Department of Health).
<i>Trendelenberg's position</i>	A position in which the head is low and the body and legs are on an inclined plane (Anderson et al., 1994). Occasionally used when a patient's blood pressure is so low in order to ensure maximum blood supply to the heart and brain.
<i>Troponin</i>	A protein in the heart muscle cell structure which is released when a patient is having a myocardial infarction. A blood test is required to measure a patient's troponin level in order to assist in the diagnosis of a myocardial infarction. If a patient's troponin level is elevated, it is indicative that they may have experienced cardiac ischaemia or a myocardial infarction.
<i>VMO</i>	Visiting Medical Officer, a senior admitting medical officer, who has completed specialised training, for example a cardiologist or an orthopaedic surgeon, on contract to a public hospital (NSW Department of Health, 2008b).