

Abstract

The role of ward sisters (WSs) is considered pivotal in the hospital setting today. This role has been described as essential to the success of nursing services, the effectiveness of health care organizations and the quality of nursing care. The environment of the health care system has changed dramatically over the past two decades, directly affecting the work environment of WSs. These changes have led to the recognition of the pivotal role of WSs as being the link between the executive management of the health care organization and the nursing staff on the units.

The purpose of the study was to describe the lived experience of WSs in today's health care environment. Phenomenology was the research approach and in-depth dialogues were used for data collection. The dialogues were analysed according to van Manen's (1990) approach. Three main themes emerged with several subthemes that further described the phenomenon. The participants were seven female ward sisters with variable work experience, all working at the same major hospital in Iceland. The participants volunteered to take part in the study and most of the dialogues took place outside their immediate work environment during June 2001 through December 2001. The findings indicated that the participants experienced enormous responsibilities in relation to staffing and running the units, especially today during this transitional time of the health care system. Lack of clear strategy from top management and/or inconsistency in following set strategy was found to be a hindrance in the job of the WSs. Emotional involvement was considerable and the participants felt that they needed more support from the organisation in order to perform effectively. Based on the findings, it is concluded that the WSs constantly reshape and re-evaluate the work on their units and lead their staff on towards the goals of the hospital organization. This is often a rewarding experience but also emotionally draining. The WSs need specific support, according to their career level in order to function effectively. Limitations are addressed as well as implications for nursing education, nursing research, nursing administration and hospital administration.