

Triage Nursing Practice in Australian Emergency
Departments 2002-2004: An Ethnography

Submitted by

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: This ethnographic study provides insight and understanding, which is needed to educate and support the Triage Nursing role in Australian Emergency Departments (EDs). The triage role has emerged to address issues in providing efficient emergency care. However, Triage Nurses and educators have found the role challenging and not well understood.

Method: Sampling was done first by developing a profile of 900 nurses who undertake the triage role in 50 NSW EDs through survey techniques. Purposive sampling was then done with data collected from participant observation in four metropolitan EDs (Level 4 and 6), observations and interviews with 10 Triage Nurses and the maintenance of a record of secondary data sources. Analysis used standard content and thematic analysis techniques.

Findings: An ED culture is reflected in a standard geography of care and embedded beliefs and rituals that sustain a cadence of care. Triage Nurses to accomplish their role and maintain this rhythm of care used three processes: gatekeeping, timekeeping and decision-making. When patient overcrowding occurred the three processes enabled Triage Nurses to implement a range of practices to restore the cadence of care to which they were culturally oriented.

Conclusion: The findings provide a framework that offers new ways of considering triage nursing practice, educational programs, policy development and future research.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The Triage Nurses who speak in this study helped me to view and come to understand the complexity of their practice. There can be no denying that this ethnographic text reflects my own cultural milieu and linguistic conventions to present a scholarly piece of work. Despite this, I believe the participants of the study would recognise this work as an accurate depiction of triage nursing practice. I remain responsible for the construction of the text, but am conscious of the debt owed to those who shared their world so openly and negotiated my understanding of the cultural environment within emergency department settings.

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GLOSSARY OF TERMS

ACEM	The Australasian College for Emergency Medicine
ATS	The Australasian Triage Scale guidelines
CDA	Central District Ambulance functions as the coordinating centre for local ambulance officers.
CNC	Clinical Nurse Consultant functions as a specialist nursing consultant
CNE	Clinical Nurse Educator functions as the key provider of educational programs
CNS	Clinical Nurse Specialist: functions as a specialist clinical expert
DNW	Patients who leave the ED prior to medical assessment
ED	Emergency Department
EDIS	Emergency Department Information System
ENA	Emergency Nurses' Association
GP	General Practitioner functions as a primary local care medical practitioner
NESB	Non-English speaking background
NSW	New South Wales – One of three east coast states of Australia
NUM	Nursing Unit Manager functions as overall departmental manager