
CLINICAL PLACEMENT AMIDST THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC: AN EXPLORATION OF NURSING STUDENTS' EMOTIONAL EXPERIENCES AND RESPONSE STRATEGIES

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ABSTRACT

KEYWORDS

Clinical placement,
Coping strategies,
Covid-19 pandemic,
Emotional experiences,
Nursing students

The nursing education and clinical placement programs, along with healthcare systems globally, have been substantially affected by the Covid-19 pandemic. This study explores the emotional experiences and response strategies of nursing students during clinical placement amidst the Covid-19 pandemic in Indonesia. Fourteen nursing students in their final year participated in the study. The study identified two main themes and associated subthemes: emotional responses (including fear, anxiety, uncertainty, and confidence) and coping strategies (including maintaining physical health, adhering to safety protocols, maintaining a positive outlook, nurturing spiritual well-being, and building self-confidence). The emotional responses highlight the challenges faced by nursing students during clinical placement, particularly fear and anxiety about contracting the virus, uncertainty, and confusion. However, some students also felt confident in their ability to navigate the challenges of clinical placement and had a sense of duty and purpose in serving their patients during the pandemic. Coping strategies employed by nursing students included maintaining physical health, adhering to safety protocols, maintaining a positive outlook, nurturing spiritual well-being, and building self-confidence. The study underscores the importance of recognizing and addressing the emotional impact of the pandemic on nursing students and the need for effective support mechanisms to help them cope with the challenges of clinical practice. Educational programs that promote mental health and well-being and practical training on infection control and safety protocols can help nursing students cope with the challenges of clinical placement during pandemics.

INTRODUCTION

The Covid-19 pandemic has significantly impacted healthcare systems worldwide, including nursing education and clinical placement programs (WHO, 2021). Nursing students have been particularly affected, as they are required to undertake clinical placements to gain practical experience, but also face increased risks of exposure to the virus in healthcare settings (Barisone et al., 2022). As a result, nursing students' emotional experiences and response strategies during clinical placement amidst the Covid-19 pandemic have become an area of growing interest for healthcare professionals and nursing educators (Al-Rawajfah et al., 2022; Alcalá-Albert et al., 2022).

Nursing students play a critical role in healthcare, and their clinical placement experiences are essential for their professional development. However, the pandemic has disrupted traditional clinical placement programs, leaving nursing students to face a new reality in clinical practice. The Covid-19 pandemic has presented numerous challenges for nursing students worldwide, particularly those undertaking clinical placement programs (Barrett, 2022; Dempsey, Gaffney, Bracken, Tully, Corcoran, McDonnell-Naughton, et al., 2023). Due to the highly contagious nature of Covid-19, healthcare settings have become high-risk environments

for transmission. This has resulted in a reduced number of available clinical placement sites and the need to adapt to new safety protocols and guidelines to mitigate the spread of the virus (WHO, 2020). Nursing students have faced unique challenges due to the pandemic, such as limited access to personal protective equipment (PPE), inadequate training on infectious disease control, and increased stress and anxiety levels (Ulenaers et al., 2020). These challenges have led to disruptions in nursing education and clinical placement programs, with many nursing schools having to adjust their curriculums to ensure the safety of their students and patients (Agu et al., 2021; Liesveld et al., 2021).

Nursing students in Indonesia have faced unique challenges, including limited resources and the lack of preparedness for handling infectious diseases, which has resulted in increased stress and anxiety levels (Susmarini et al., 2022). Zandrato and Hiko's (2021) review reported several challenges faced by nursing students during their clinical placements during the Covid-19 pandemic in Indonesia. These included fear of contracting the virus, limited clinical exposure, and reduced access to clinical resources. Additionally, Manik et al. (2022) found increased anxiety and stress levels among nursing students during the pandemic and recommended the use of virtual clinical simulations as an alternative to actual clinical placement. However, many believe that virtual clinical placement cannot fully replace the experiential learning that occurs in real clinical placements (Barisone et al., 2019; Roberts et al., 2019). The emotional impact of the pandemic on nursing students' clinical placement experiences has become an area of concern for healthcare professionals and nursing educators, as it can affect students' professional development and well-being (Al-Rawajfah et al., 2022; Alcalá-Albert et al., 2022). Previous studies have explored the emotional experiences of healthcare professionals during the pandemic, but few have specifically focused on nursing students' experiences during clinical placement (Bozdağ & Ergün, 2021; Magill et al., 2020). Therefore, this study aimed to fill this gap in the literature by exploring nursing students' emotional experiences and response strategies during clinical placement amidst the Covid-19 pandemic in Indonesia.

RESEARCH METHOD

A qualitative exploratory investigation was undertaken based on Sandelowski's proposal (Sandelowski, 2010). In addition, the interpretive theoretical framework served as the basis for this investigation (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Human behavior is meaningful when viewed from an interpretive perspective, and the purpose of research is to get knowledge of how individuals react to and comprehend the significance of social phenomena (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The objective of utilizing qualitative methodology is to comprehend complex phenomena and subjective experiences, such as emotions, beliefs, and attitudes (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). The research was carried out in accordance with the consolidated criteria for reporting qualitative research (COREQ) (Tong et al., 2007).

Participants were recruited from a nursing school at a university in West Java, Indonesia, who had completed or were currently undertaking clinical placement during the pandemic. Data collection was conducted through semi-structured interviews. The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. The interviews were conducted in Indonesian, the native language of the participants, by the research team who were fluent in the language. Interviews were conducted until data saturation was achieved.

Data analysis followed a conventional qualitative content analysis approach. The transcripts were read and re-read, and sub-themes were identified based on the patterns and meanings that emerged from the data. The sub-themes were then organized into themes, and the data was interpreted in relation to the research questions. Ethical approval was sought from

the Research Ethics Committee at the researcher's institution. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, and they were assured of confidentiality and anonymity throughout the study.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The study included 14 nursing students in their final year, whose ages ranged from 20 to 25 years old, as indicated in Table 1 which displays their main socio-demographic information. About one-third of the participants had prior healthcare work experience, with the majority having worked in hospitals during the pandemic.

Two main themes and associated subthemes were abstracted from the data, embodying how nursing students attempted to cope with clinical practice during the Covid-19 pandemic: (1) Emotional responses and (2) Strategies.

Emotional Responses

The first theme, experiences and emotional responses encompassed the different emotions experienced while dealing with the challenges of clinical placements during the pandemic. The participants expressed a range of emotional experiences regarding clinical practice during the pandemic. They ranged from fear and anxiety to confidence and a sense of calling to serve. The participants acknowledged that they experienced anxiety due to the high number of Covid-19 cases:

At first, I gotta admit, I was scared because Covid-19 was still everywhere, and there were so many cases. I was really worried that I might catch it too, since it's still so active out there. (R1)

The Covid-19 pandemic caused a lot of uncertainty, especially among students who were required to participate in clinical placements in hospitals. Hearing about the high number of fatalities from Covid-19 made them feel anxious and scared for their own safety. They worried that they too might fall victim to the disease. The news of the pandemic had a profound impact on the students, making them feel apprehensive and uncertain about their future:

We heard a lot of news about people dying from Covid, and there were still a lot of cases back then. I was really scared, scared of getting infected and even dying. (R8)

When the Covid-19 cases were increasing, I felt very worried. I was scared of getting infected and even dying from the disease. (R10)

The feeling of concern was not only experienced by the participants but also by their parents who were worried about the safety and health of their children during the pandemic:

At first, when we were told that we had to do our clinical practice during the Covid-19 pandemic, we were really scared and thought that Covid-19 was super scary. We were freaking out, and our parents were worried too. (R2)

When the number of Covid cases started to increase, we were really scared. Our parents were also worried, they were scared that we might get infected and get sick. They would constantly call us to check on our health and see if we were doing okay. Some parents even told their children to take a break from school because they were worried that they might get infected during clinical placement. (R4)

Due to the lack of clarity and understanding surrounding Covid-19 at the time, the participating students experienced confusion regarding the disease and the appropriate actions to take during their clinical practice in the hospital:

Back then, Covid-19 was still a new thing and everyone was still trying to figure it out. Even though we were taught [about Covid-19] by our school, I still felt like I wasn't ready to do clinical practice during the pandemic. It also made my friends and I really worried. (R2)

At that time, I didn't feel like I had enough skills. I felt like there was still a lot of information and skills that I didn't have and that school didn't provide me with enough to do clinical practice during the pandemic. I still had a lot of questions in my mind, especially about my safety. (R10)

Despite the participants not engaging with, interacting with, or providing hands-on care to Covid-19 positive patients and those in the Covid-19 isolation room, they maintain apprehension regarding the potential transmission of Covid-19:

Even though we care for patients in regular hospital wards, it doesn't mean they're safe. They could have Covid-19 without showing symptoms or get a false negative result. It freaked me out during my clinical practice, and I thought I'd get infected if I treated a Covid-19 patient. (R7)

The participants conveyed their uncertainty not only regarding the current situation but also the tasks that they were expected to undertake. They were doubtful about their abilities and limitations. Furthermore, the participants felt that they would not obtain the essential nursing skills during their clinical placement at that particular time:

Of course, there is some worry, especially because we can't perform actions that nurses should do directly with patients. There are specific limitations, and nursing procedures are now very restricted. (R9)

Our clinical practice is limited. Moreover, we're not sure what nursing students are allowed to do, which makes it hard to meet our school's academic requirements. (R6)

A few participants were confident in their ability to carry out clinical practice at the hospital as they believed that being young and healthy would prevent them from contracting Covid-19:

I'm not worried or scared at all. I believe that if we take care of ourselves and have a good support system, then Covid-19 is not a big threat, especially if we're young and healthy. It's just a matter of having the right mindset. (R8)

Several participants are motivated to pursue clinical placement despite the circumstances of the COVID-19 pandemic. They hold the belief that this undertaking aids in the development of their capabilities in knowledge acquisition, skill acquisition, and emotional competencies. They aspire to become professional nurses through this activity in the future:

As nursing students and future healthcare workers, we should learn that this pandemic teaches us to be patient, surrender, and be more professional in our field. We should be able to work anytime, anywhere, and under any circumstances. We need to take care of our patients with love and dedication. (R10)

If we want to serve wholeheartedly, we need to serve without fear of the disease. The most important thing is that God protects us. This is our way of serving society during the pandemic. (R4)

Strategies

Strategies referred to the coping mechanisms that nursing students employed to deal with the challenges posed by the pandemic during their clinical placement. The participants employed various strategies to help them manage their anxiety and perform their practices effectively in the hospital setting. They highlighted the importance of maintaining health during their clinical placement, maintaining a positive outlook, adhering to safety protocols, nurturing their spiritual well-being, and building self-confidence.

Participants maintained their physical health through various means, such as getting adequate rest, consuming healthy food, taking vitamins, exercising, and other similar strategies:

If we want to boost our immunity, we gotta take care of ourselves, you know? That means eating right, getting enough sleep, taking breaks when we need them, and finding ways to chill out and de-stress. And when we do feel stressed, we gotta figure out what's causing it and deal with it head-on. (R2)

To keep our immune system in top shape, we need to stay active, take our vitamins, and always be on top of our hygiene game. That means washing our hands, keeping our distance, and wearing masks whenever we need to. (R3)

If we really wanna give our immune system a boost, there are some simple things we can do. Getting some sun is key, and taking vitamin C is also really helpful. Personally, I like to drink warm water with lemon in the morning, too. And during this whole pandemic situation, I've been making sure to take more time for myself to relax and unwind. (R7)

Having a positive outlook was crucial for participants practicing clinical placement during the COVID-19 pandemic. Participants realized that having a positive mindset can affect their immunity. Here are some statements from participants:

You know, when we freak out, it can really mess with our immune system. So when I heard that I had to do some practical work at the hospital, I made a conscious effort to stay cool and collected. I didn't wanna get sick or anything. (R1)

If we wanna boost our immune system, we gotta shift our focus away from all the stressful stuff that's going on around us. For me, that means staying focused on my goals of finishing my education and getting good grades. It helps me stay motivated and gives me something positive to focus on. (R9)

In addition, participants also realized and stated that disease prevention must be accompanied by self-protection to avoid exposure. They used personal protective equipment, washed hands regularly, and kept a distance to cut off the transmission access:

I try to keep myself safe by staying away from others, washing my hands a lot, wearing a mask, staying hydrated, and also trying to keep my mind in check. (R1)

I make sure to wash my hands frequently, follow all the health protocols, wear a mask, and I even switch to a new mask every four hours. (R2)

As a nurse, I wear a long-sleeved uniform, use covers and PPE, and scrub my hands frequently. I always wash my hands before doing anything, and I wear head protection too. (R8)

Another strategy used by participants to deal with anxiety when carrying out practice during the pandemic is through prayer which was acknowledged as a way to nurture their spiritual well-being. According to the participants, praying can reduce the anxiety they feel.

when I start freaking out, I just talk to God and ask Him to keep me healthy and safe from all the COVID-19 craziness and other messed up stuff that we don't want. It's kind of my go-to move when I need some peace of mind (R7)

I gotta admit, during the whole COVID thing, I found myself taking more 'me time' than usual - you know, just chilling by myself and doing my thing. I also started getting closer to God through prayer and other forms of worship to find some peace and calm amidst all the craziness. (R3)

The participants made an effort to cultivate self-confidence as a coping mechanism for managing anxiety and stress. Self-confidence was identified as one of the strategies employed by the participants to address these challenges. The participants found that having a sense of self-assurance allowed them to maintain a sense of control in uncomfortable situations, such as during clinical practice. It also provided them with a sense of competence and the belief that they were capable of handling difficult situations.:

I think if we want to do better, we gotta believe in ourselves. Personally, I have faith in my abilities, and I know that with practice and learning, I can really nail clinical practice and do a great job. (R1)

I think the key to overcoming it is to boost my self-confidence and be more sure of myself. When we're nervous or scared, patients can totally sense it, so it's important to keep a cool head and stay confident. (R6)

Discussion

The present study explored the emotional experiences and response strategies of nursing students during clinical placement amidst the Covid-19 pandemic. The study identified two main themes and associated subthemes, namely "Emotional Responses" and "Strategies," which offer valuable insights into the coping mechanisms employed by nursing students during this challenging time.

The findings of this study revealed that nursing students experienced a range of emotional responses during clinical placement amidst the Covid-19 pandemic. These responses included fear and anxiety, uncertainty, confusion, confidence, and a sense of being called to serve. Parents' concerns about their children doing clinical placement was another emotional response identified. This emotional response highlighted the impact of the pandemic not only on nursing students but also on their families.

Fear and anxiety were common emotional responses among the participants, as they were concerned about contracting the virus while performing their clinical duties (Barisone et al., 2022; Olufadewa et al., 2020). The uncertainty surrounding the pandemic also contributed to their anxiety, as they were unsure about what the future held for them (Dewart et al., 2020; Hussien et al., 2020). Confusion was also noted as an emotional response, as the rapidly changing information about the pandemic left some nursing students feeling uncertain and unsure about what to do (Ulenaers et al., 2020).

However, not all emotional responses were negative. Confidence and a sense of being called to serve were also identified as emotional responses. Some nursing students felt confident in their ability to navigate the challenges of clinical placement amidst the pandemic (Hussien et al., 2020), while others felt a sense of duty and purpose in serving their patients during this difficult time. Similarly, Uzunbacak et al. (2022) reported that nurses who perceived their job as significant, had a desire to serve humanity, and found their work to be meaningful also expressed a sense of calling.

These emotional responses underscore the challenges that nursing students faced during clinical placement amidst the Covid-19 pandemic. The concerns of parents also highlight the impact of the pandemic on the families of nursing students. It is important for healthcare organizations to recognize and address the emotional impact of pandemics on nursing students and their families to ensure that they receive the support they need.

The emotional responses identified in this study are consistent with previous research highlighting the psychological impact of pandemics on healthcare workers. For example, Deng and Naslund (2021), found that healthcare workers in low- and middle-income countries experienced anxiety, fear, and uncertainty during the Covid-19 pandemic. The emotional responses identified in this study underscore the importance of addressing the psychological well-being of nursing students during pandemics to ensure that they are able to cope with the challenges of clinical placement effectively.

In response to these emotional challenges, nursing students employed a variety of coping strategies during clinical placement. The strategies included maintaining physical health during clinical placement (Maben et al., 2020), adhering to safety protocols (Dempsey et al., 2023), maintaining a positive outlook (Roca et al., 2021), nurturing spiritual well-being (Savitsky et al., 2020), and building self-confidence (Aslan & Pekince, 2021; Barisone et al., 2022). These strategies were found to be effective in helping nursing students manage their emotional responses and maintain their well-being during clinical placement amidst the Covid-19 pandemic.

The findings of this study highlight the importance of providing nursing students with adequate support and resources to cope with the emotional challenges of clinical placement during pandemics. Educational programs that promote mental health and well-being (Labrague, 2022) and practical training on infection control and safety protocols (Kim et al., 2020) can help nursing students feel more confident and prepared to deal with the challenges of clinical placement amidst pandemics.

In conclusion, this study provides important insights into the emotional experiences and response strategies of nursing students during clinical placement amidst the Covid-19 pandemic. The findings suggest that nursing students faced a range of emotional challenges during this time, and employed various coping strategies to manage their emotional responses. Future research should explore the effectiveness of these coping strategies in promoting mental health and well-being among nursing students during pandemics.

This study has some limitations that should be considered when interpreting the results. Firstly, the sample size was relatively small, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to other nursing student populations. Secondly, the study only focused on the experiences of nursing students during clinical placement and did not explore the experiences of other healthcare professionals. Finally, the study was conducted during a specific time period and may not reflect the experiences of nursing students during different phases of the pandemic.

Despite the limitations, this study has several strengths. Firstly, the use of a qualitative descriptive design allowed for an in-depth exploration of nursing students' emotional experiences and response strategies. Secondly, the study used purposive sampling to recruit

participants who had completed clinical placement during the pandemic, providing a rich and diverse sample. Finally, the thematic analysis approach employed in this study allowed for the identification of clear themes and subthemes related to nursing students' emotional experiences and response strategies, providing valuable insights into the coping mechanisms employed by nursing students during the pandemic.

CONCLUSION

This qualitative study revealed two main themes and associated subthemes that encapsulated how nursing students dealt with clinical placement during the Covid-19 pandemic: emotional responses (including fear, anxiety, uncertainty, and confidence) and strategies (including maintaining physical health, adhering to safety protocols, maintaining a positive outlook, nurturing spiritual well-being, and building self-confidence). The findings highlight the importance of recognizing and addressing the emotional impact of the pandemic on nursing students and the need for effective support mechanisms to help them cope with the challenges of clinical practice.

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