



NURSES' EXPERIENCES OF REHABILITATION CARE FOR OLDER PEOPLE WITH STROKE AT A SELECTED REHABILITATION HOSPITAL, SRI LANKA

A. A. S. Y. Adikari, J. K. A. M. N. Perera, K. S. M. Perera, A. G. D. S. Galappaththi, W. I. S. Fernando and A. V. P. Madhavi*

The Department of Nursing, The Open University of Sri Lanka, Sri Lanka

Stroke is a leading cause of long-term disability among older adults, often requiring comprehensive rehabilitation to restore functional independence. Nurses play a key role in the multidisciplinary care team, particularly in rehabilitation settings where continuous support, encouragement, and skilled care are needed. Understanding nurses' experiences in delivering such care is essential for enhancing patient outcomes and improving nursing practice. The primary objective of this study was to explore the experiences of nurses in providing rehabilitation care to older adults recovering from stroke at the Rehabilitation Hospital, Sri Lanka. The study also aimed to discuss the specific needs of older stroke patients, describe patients' future expectations as identified by nurses, and perceived challenges and enablers in their caregiving role. A qualitative approach and descriptive design were employed. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with purposively selected registered nurses working in the stroke rehabilitation wards at the selected Rehabilitation Hospital. The interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and analyzed thematically using Braun and Clarke's method to extract key themes and patterns related to their experiences. Ethics approval was sought from the Ethics Review Committee of the Colombo National Hospital, Sri Lanka. Thematic analysis revealed four main themes: (1) Family support and empathy – nurses highlighted the significance of patients' strong ties with family and the role of empathetic support by family in meeting their physical and emotional needs; (2) Hope for recovery and independence – Many patients hoped to regain their independence and return to their normal life. (3) Emotional and Physical Burden – perceived challenges in care giver role included emotional stress, heavy workloads, and limited resources; (4) Collaboration and Communication – inter-professional teamwork and effective communication were identified as crucial enablers for successful rehabilitation outcomes. Nurses' experiences in the rehabilitation of older stroke patients reflect notable challenges in their role. Addressing staffing shortages, improving resource availability, and encouraging family visits and enhancing family awareness of patients' conditions are essential steps toward optimizing rehabilitation care delivery and gaining better patient outcomes.

Keywords: rehabilitation, stroke patients, nurses' experiences

**Corresponding Author: avpma@ou.ac.lk*



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INTRODUCTION

Stroke is a predominant cause of long-term disability worldwide, particularly affecting older adults who often require comprehensive rehabilitation services to regain functional independence (Feigin et al., 2017). Globally, stroke is the second leading cause of death and a major contributor to adult disability, imposing significant burdens on healthcare systems and families (GBD 2019 Stroke Collaborators, 2021). In Sri Lanka, stroke prevalence among older people is rising due to demographic transitions and lifestyle changes (Gunawardena et al., 2020).

Rehabilitation after stroke involves multidisciplinary interventions aimed at maximizing recovery potential, minimizing disability, and enhancing quality of life. Nurses form an essential component of the multidisciplinary team, providing continuous bedside care, psychological support, and facilitating therapy adherence (Morris et al., 2016). However, nursing experiences in stroke rehabilitation, especially in resource-limited settings like Sri Lanka, have not been extensively documented.

This study aims to explore nurses' experiences in delivering rehabilitation care to older stroke patients in a selected rehabilitation hospital in Sri Lanka. Understanding these experiences can inform policies and improve nursing practices to enhance patient outcomes (Rixon et al., 2019).

The primary objective was to explore the experiences of nurses in providing rehabilitation care to older stroke survivors. Secondary objectives included identifying specific patient needs as perceived by nurses, outlining patients' future expectations, and examining the perceived challenges and enabling factors affecting nurses' caregiving roles.

METHODOLOGY

A qualitative descriptive design was employed, chosen for its suitability in capturing detailed and contextual insights into healthcare experiences (Sandelowski, 2000). Registered nurses with a minimum of two years' experience, currently working in stroke rehabilitation wards, were purposively sampled to ensure the collection of rich and relevant data.



Data were collected through semi-structured interviews conducted in private rooms, each lasting 30–45 minutes and scheduled after the participants' duty hours. Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim to ensure data accuracy and integrity (Polit & Beck, 2017). Thematic analysis, as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006), was utilized to identify patterns and themes within the data. This six-step process involved familiarization with transcripts, coding, theme development, review, definition, and reporting.

Ethical clearance was granted by the Ethics Review Committee of Colombo National Hospital. Participants gave informed consent and were assured of confidentiality and anonymity throughout the research.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis revealed four key themes illuminating nurses' experiences in stroke rehabilitation care:

1. Family Support and Empathy

Nurses emphasized the critical role of family involvement in patient recovery, noting that strong familial bonds fulfill essential social and psychological needs. Family members often provide not only physical assistance but also vital emotional support, which nurses perceived as essential for patient motivation and psychological well-being (Nicholson et al., 2017). Several nurses noted that patients with active family engagement showed better adherence to rehabilitation protocols and improved mood.

The importance of family in stroke rehabilitation aligns with international research emphasizing family-centered care as a determinant of successful rehabilitation outcomes (Forster et al., 2012). In Sri Lanka's collectivist culture, the family's involvement in caregiving as a specific need of clients is especially significant (Silva & Fonseka, 2018).

Nurses also expressed the need for educating families about stroke and rehabilitation processes to improve understanding and empathy, which is needed to meet patients' specific need and to facilitate more effective home care post-discharge (Rensink et al., 2017).

2. Hope for Recovery and Independence

A recurring observation and common experience by nurses was patients' strong desire and hope to regain independence, including walking and performing daily activities without assistance. Nurses identified patients' hope as a critical motivational factor that positively influences patient engagement and rehabilitation success (Maclean et al., 2000).

This finding corresponds with studies demonstrating that hope and self-efficacy are strongly linked to better rehabilitation outcomes and psychological adjustment after



stroke (Levack et al., 2017). Nurses played a key role in reinforcing this hope through encouragement and goal-setting support.

However, nurses also stressed that unrealistic expectations sometimes caused frustration, indicating the importance of balancing hope with realistic goal setting in rehabilitation planning (Pollock et al., 2014).

3. Emotional and Physical Burden

Nurses reported experiencing significant emotional and physical challenges related to stroke rehabilitation care. The workload was described as heavy due to high patient-to-nurse ratios and complex care demands. This is consistent with global evidence of nursing burnout in stroke units.

Emotional stress stemmed from witnessing patients' suffering, slow recovery trajectories, and sometimes death, which contributed to compassion fatigue (Woo & Ji, 2018). Nurses also highlighted a lack of resources, including insufficient rehabilitation equipment and inadequate physical space, which impeded optimal care delivery.

Such findings echo reports from similar low- and middle-income settings, where resource constraints and understaffing exacerbate the strain on nurses (Fitzgerald & Taylor, 2021). Addressing these challenges is vital for sustainable stroke rehabilitation programs.

4. Collaboration and Communication

Effective interprofessional collaboration was identified as a crucial enabler of successful rehabilitation care. Nurses emphasized the need for clear, consistent communication between physiotherapists, occupational therapists, physicians, and nursing staff to coordinate care plans and monitor progress (Kisvetrová et al., 2020). Where collaboration was strong, patient outcomes and staff satisfaction improved. Conversely, breakdowns in communication, particularly during shift changes or between departments, led to fragmented care and delays (Anderson et al., 2019).

This finding is consistent with literature advocating integrated multidisciplinary teamwork as a best practice in stroke rehabilitation (Langhorne & Baylan, 2017).

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The study elucidated nurses' experiences in stroke rehabilitation as simultaneously rewarding and challenging. Nurses play a pivotal role in patient recovery, yet face emotional, physical, and systemic obstacles.

To optimize rehabilitation care and improve outcomes for older stroke patients, the following recommendations can be suggested:



Enhance Staffing and Resources: Increase nurse staffing ratios and provide adequate rehabilitation equipment and space to reduce workload and improve care quality (Chen et al., 2018).

Promote Family Engagement: Developing structured programs to educate and actively involve families in rehabilitation and post-discharge care is crucial for meeting patients' specific needs (Rensink et al., 2017).

Support Nurse Wellbeing: Implement psychological support services and resilience training to address emotional burdens and prevent burnout (Woo & Ji, 2018).

Strengthen Multidisciplinary Communication: Institutionalize regular team meetings and standardized communication protocols to foster collaboration (Langhorne & Baylan, 2017).

Addressing these areas can enhance nurses' capacity to deliver effective rehabilitation, ultimately contributing to better recovery trajectories and quality of life for older stroke patients in Sri Lanka and similar settings.

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