The Experience of Presence Among Telehealth Nurses

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ABSTRACT

Background: Telehealth technology allows for the provision of nursing care even when the patient and nurse are physically separated from each other. Telehealth has shown positive effects on healthcare costs and healthcare access. Although it can increase healthcare access and decrease healthcare costs, the use of telehealth has altered the typical pattern of nurse–patient proximity. It is unknown how the physical separation related to telehealth use may affect the experience of presence among nurses during nurse–patient interactions.

Purpose: The purpose of the research was to gain knowledge about the ways that nurses experience presence during interactions with patients using telehealth technology.

Methods: A qualitative descriptive design with convenience sampling was used for this study. Sample inclusion criteria included being a registered nurse with at least 1 year of experience using telehealth technology and working in telehealth at the time of the study. Institutional review board approval was received before beginning data collection. Participants (n = 6) provided informed consent. Qualitative data were obtained by individual, audiotaped, semistructured interviews. The data were transcribed and analyzed deductively for the existence of presence. Ethnograph version 6.0 software was used to assist in organizing and analyzing the data.

Results: Two examples of presence during telehealth nurse–patient interactions were described by participants.

Conclusion: This study documented for the first time the experience of presence among nurses who interact with their patients using only nonvideo telehealth technology.

KEY WORDS

presence, telehealth, telenursing, nursing presence.

Introduction

Methods to contain healthcare costs while increasing access to healthcare are being sought in countries around the world (Agency for Health Research and Quality, 2008; Anguita, 2012). Telehealth technology has been effective in addressing both of these concerns (Cipriano, 2011; Cusack et al., 2007; Ernesäter, Holmström, & Engström, 2009). However, telehealth alters the typical pattern of the nurse and patient being in close physical proximity.

Telehealth nurses are working in all 50 states of the United States and were represented in 36 countries around the world in a 2005 survey (American Telemedicine Association, 2005). The Health Services Resources Administration of the United States has recommended increased use of telehealth (Health Services Resources Administration of the United States, 2012). As use of telehealth increases, more nurses will increasingly interact with patients who are physically distant. For this reason, it is important for the nursing profession to evaluate the effects of telehealth technology on the special type of nurse–patient relationship which is characterized as presence.

Literature Review

The term “presence” (Presence, n.d.) is often used to describe a person’s physical location. Indeed, presence is defined as “the fact of being in a particular place” in Merriam-Webster’s Online Dictionary. For nursing, however, presence has a deeper meaning.

Presence has been described as a special connection in some nurse–patient interactions that benefits both persons. In Humanistic Nursing Theory, presence is the close, beneficial, “being-there-for and being-there-with” (Kleiman, 2009, p. 6) relationship that may exist between a nurse and a patient. Paterson and Zderad, originators of the Humanistic Nursing Theory, describe presence as highest level in the stepwise process of nurse–patient interaction. According to Paterson and Zderad, presence is characterized as “being with [another person] with the whole of oneself” (Paterson & Zderad, 1988, p. 25). Presence is felt as a “flow between two persons” (Paterson & Zderad, 1988, p. 29). The experience of presence has benefits for both patients and nurses (Kleiman, 2009; Paterson & Zderad, 1988; Potter & Frisch, 2007; Zyblock, 2010).