Notice of the Final Oral Examination
for the Degree of Master of Nursing

of

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“Getting Through the Shift Navigating Moral Distress in Acute Care Nursing”

School of Nursing

Monday, December 5, 2016
1:00PM
David Turpin Building
Room A144

Supervisory Committee:
Dr. Bernadette Pauly, School of Nursing, University of Victoria (Co-Supervisor)
Dr. Rita Schreiber, School of Nursing, UVic (Co-Supervisor)

External Examiner:
Dr. Paddy Rodney, School of Nursing, University of British Columbia

Chair of Oral Examination:
Dr. Susan Tasker, Department of Educational Psychology & Leadership Studies, UVic

Dr. David Capson, Dean, Faculty of Graduate Studies
Abstract

With the corporatization of healthcare, combined with rapid advances in medical technology, frontline health care workers, especially nurses, are facing an increase in daily ethical dilemmas, with potential increases in moral distress. The contributing factors and negative effects of moral distress are well researched, in particular as they impact nurses in specialty areas. However, understanding how nurses navigate moral distress, specifically in general medical and surgical units, is not as well understood. The purpose of this study was to understand and articulate the processes that nurses carry out when navigating moral distress, by exploring their interactions with the health care environment. Using grounded theory methodology, a substantive theory was developed to explain the process. The participants in this study were all registered nurses from an acute care academic hospital, who worked on non-specialty medical and/or surgical units. Data collection consisted of audio-recorded face-to-face interviews that were transcribed post interview. All the events and situations that resulted in the experience of moral distress were primarily rooted in organizational structures, which often blindsided the nurses in this study, and led to a sense of feeling ill-equipped and unsupported to respond in the moment. Furthermore, the participants expressed their inability to be agents of change due to the established organizational expectations. The basic social process for navigating moral distress was “Just getting through the shift”. This theory is comprised of the categories of Experiencing Moral Distress, Making Sense of the Situation, and Finding the Way. In working through these processes, the participants engaged in navigating moral distress. Making sense of the situation was an ongoing process that nurses engaged in whereby they sought out knowledge in various ways, such as exploring internal resources, and building relationships with their peers, their patients, and patients’ families. Throughout this iterative process of making sense of the situation, the nurses were then able to find their way. Participants discussed positive outcomes such as reflecting and learning from the experience. However, despite this response, there was a feeling of powerlessness to make a difference. Therefore, they focused on providing the best care they could and getting on with their shift without experiencing closure.

Keywords: moral distress, acute care nurses, grounded theory