Minimizing Strain: How nurses sustain their image of themselves as “good nurses” while surviving their shifts

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BACKGROUND
Older adults are the most common population in hospitals (1). Hospitals are not conducive to the needs of older patients (2,3).

RESEARCH OBJECTIVE
The aim of this study was to explore how nurses are managing care of hospitalized older adults.

METHODS
Design: Interpretive descriptive (4) informed by a symbolic interactionism theoretical framework (5).
Sample and Setting: 18 Registered Nurses and 3 Licensed Practical Nurses. Participant observation occurred on two nursing units: a general medical unit & a geriatric acute care unit.
Data collection: 375 hours of participant observations; 34 interviews with 21 participants and review of selective documents.

RESULTS
Surviving the shift explains nurses’ behaviours to protect their patients in response to their perceptions of constrained resources.

Nurses perceived their practice with hospitalized older adults as challenging, misunderstood, and ignored because there is “the same amount of people” (RN1, Site 1) on their units as on units with younger patients, despite the increased time needed for older adult care.

STRETCHING RESOURCES
Nurses were frequently searching for supplies leading them to describe “the system as time-consuming” (LPN 1, Site 1) leading them to focus on efficiencies to accomplish the greatest number of tasks for their patients

PROTECTING PATIENTS ON THE UNIT
Nurses engaged in activities within their span of control to achieve a narrow definition of patient safety for all of the patients on their unit.

Nurses often used physical and chemical and restraints to “manage [their] workload [because they] had to think of the other patients” (RN 10, Site 2).

These practices allowed nurses to attend to all of their patients, which were seen as a higher priority than any one individual patient, and maintain a calm environment.

If it seemed calm, nurses could feel like they were minimizing the strains of their workload.

DISCUSSION
Our societal views about aging are reflected in the responses nurses experience when they try to articulate their challenges and in their actions to keep older patients safe.

Older adult nursing is not considered complex by other nurses (3)

Much can be learned about how to improve care of hospitalized older adults by listening to nurses’ perspectives about how healthcare systems are contributing to suboptimal older adult care and engaging nurses in conversations about their nursing practices.

References