

Title:

Strategies for Relational Caring of Older Persons in Long-Term Care Homes During COVID-19: Emerging Perspectives of Family Partners and Professional Carers in Ontario, Canada

Abstract:

Relational caring promotes social connectedness, reciprocity and dialogue among older persons, family care partners and professional carers. This study aims to explore the relational caring experiences of family partner and professional carers in long-term care homes (LTCHs) during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Preliminary data will be presented from an ongoing critical incident study involving family partner and professional carers of older persons in LTCHs in Ontario, Canada. Participants completed online surveys using the Opinio platform. Data were examined using thematic content analysis.

Initial data from 5 family partner and 4 professional carers indicated that open communication was the means through which they facilitated and advocated for relational caring of older people. Pre-pandemic, relational caring involved sharing news, stories, food items and affection. Pandemic conditions required safety protocols and visiting restrictions, negatively impacting direct contact and carers' mental health. Participants accessed resources such as conversation with family and friends, online educational resources about generic strategies for stress and anxiety, and counselling services to mitigate and address mental health challenges during the pandemic. Participants suggested education to strengthen family-staff collaboration and creative decision-making during pandemic conditions. Additionally, participants recommended increased access to behavioural support for residents from community mental health services, as well as direct access for their own individual and group mental health support within LTCHs.

COVID-19 restrictions presented significant barriers to relational caring of older persons in LTCHs. Nonetheless, family partner and professional carers continued to support relational caring through advocacy and collaborative decision-making with and on behalf of older persons.