

Title:

Challenges to Providing Relational Care in Long-term Care Homes during COVID-19: Emerging Results from an Online Critical Incident Method Study

Abstract:

Relational care is among best practice expectations in Ontario long-term care homes (LTCHs). However, the COVID-19 pandemic and related policies, such as, physical distancing and the use of personal protective equipment (PPE), have constrained healthcare workers' ability to provide relational care. Our study aimed to understand the challenges faced by healthcare workers in engaging in relational care of older people in LTCHs during the pandemic. This qualitative study employed a critical incident method. The study sample consisted of 51 healthcare providers who worked in LTCHs during waves 1 and/or 2 of the pandemic. They completed an online questionnaire that captured critical incidents involving care situations. Critical incidents were analyzed thematically. Participants identified numerous challenges to providing relational care. Personal-level barriers included fear, anxiety, and stress about COVID-19 transmission risks, the absence of family members who are essential care partners, mitigating the anger and mistrust of residents and their families, and addressing residents' deteriorating health. Institutional-level barriers included staffing shortages, inadequate PPE, lack of access to communication technology, limited mental health support, and management's inconsistent responses to healthcare workers' concerns. However, participants also provided insight into their flexibility and creativity in enacting relational care practices despite these challenges. Maintaining relational care during the COVID-19 pandemic requires additional support and resources, and access to technology and equipment for healthcare workers. Furthermore, organizational leaders must actively collaborate with and listen to healthcare workers' needs to support their ability to engage in relational care of residents during a pandemic context.