

A Ritual Investigation of Sudden Death Events in an Urban United States Emergency Department

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This study was conducted in an urban hospital emergency department (ED) in the United States. An analytical auto ethnographic approach was utilized by the author who is a nurse-anthropologist and a bereaved parent. In sudden and a more “prepared for” death, the dying person goes through a rite of passage van Gennep (1960[1909]) and enters into an area of liminality Turner (1967). A key transition from life to death occurs and crossing a threshold where the dying person cannot cross back.

The aims of this study were to: 1) Identify and describe the meaning of social rituals to families and healthcare staff involved in sudden death events, 2) Discover the organizational culture and power structure involved with the formal and informal rituals in a sudden death and 3) Analyze the data collected regarding the social rituals and organizational culture in sudden events in an urban ED in the U.S. to contribute to the literature on death, dying and ritual processes.

In a yearlong ethnographic study, these research activities were conducted: 1) extensive participation observation in the ED setting, 2) twenty in-depth face-to-face interviews with staff members who worked with families experiencing sudden death events and 3) ten in-depth face-to-face interviews with eleven family members at least three months after the sudden death event occurred. All interviews were audio taped, transcribed and analyzed for themes.

Findings included identification of ritualized activity by hospital staff in sudden death events despite the lack of official policy in this area. Staff and families’ stories about the ritual process as the sudden death event progressed in the ED were analyzed. It was concluded that the ritual process overall gave structure and meaning to staff and families involved in sudden death events.

Biography:

Mary Eleanor Mitsch is a Nurse Anthropologist and Professor in the College of Nursing and Health and the Director of the Health Sciences program at Madonna University. She is the lead faculty in the area of population health care management, teaching health promotion and navigating the US health care system for the health sciences program. She also holds status as a graduate faculty member in the Graduate Health Educator Certificate program. Her main area of research interest is ritual activity and meaning making during sudden death events.