



# Do my feelings count? Caring for people who present with alcohol related illness or injury to a small rural coastal hospital - the emergency nurse's experience.



Elizabeth McCall, Northern NSW LHD  
[elizabeth.mccall@ncahs.health.nsw.gov.au](mailto:elizabeth.mccall@ncahs.health.nsw.gov.au)

## Aim

This exploratory research study sought to understand the experience of Emergency Department (ED) registered nurses who deliver care to patients presenting with alcohol related injury or illness.

## Background

The northern NSW coastal town of Byron Bay is a major Australian tourist destination for all age groups. There is an above New South Wales state average incidence of violent behaviour, some of which being associated with alcohol misuse and requiring attendance at the ED. Community meetings have been held, seeking proactive solutions and have included a variety of business, police and Licensing & Gaming official stakeholders.

## Methods

Hermeneutic phenomenology informed this interpretive research project. Data was collected from nineteen participants divided into three focus groups and two participants who were interviewed in-depth. Data analysis sought thematic interpretations, with a view to transforming personal experience into disciplinary understanding.

## Findings

Participants expressed frustration and concern in the providing safe, effective care to this patient cohort. They experienced fear at times, both in relation to their own physical safety and that of other patients and staff in the ED. However, they also had a degree of tolerance for the misbehaviour, particularly in the younger age groups. The participants noted that they often did not have the time or staff to address associated issues such the health risks of excessive alcohol consumption with this patient group.

## Conclusion

Emergency nurses recognise harmful alcohol consumption as a risky activity. While acknowledging time and staffing constraints and knowledge deficits, most participants acknowledged the public health benefits of acquiring education that will assist in the provision of alcohol brief interventions in the ED.

## Implications for health care

Workplace stress related to caring for alcohol-intoxicated patients needs to be acknowledged by managers, and practices to allow for discussion and debriefing implemented and supported. Education that enhances both the knowledge and confidence of emergency nurses will assist in developing alcohol brief intervention education in the ED. Additionally, the electronic medical record used in the ED requires systems redesign to incorporate a distinct prompt to prompt emergency nurses to obtain a substance use history from all patients presenting to the ED.

*For the full report on this project visit our website, follow the link to the Rural Research Capacity Building Program and click on 'view completed projects'*

Elizabeth is the Nurse Manager at Byron District Hospital and has a Master's degree in Health Sciences. Elizabeth is passionate about supporting nurses and providing evidence based nursing care to patients.

Elizabeth manages a ward that includes the provision of in-patient alcohol and drug withdrawal services. Her research focused on emergency nurses' experiences of caring for alcohol intoxicated patients in the ED and what knowledge and support they require to implement alcohol brief intervention education as a public health initiative.



[www.heti.nsw.gov.au](http://www.heti.nsw.gov.au)