ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Nurses' adherence to nursing care practices for ventilated patients in the Adult Intensive Care Unit at the University Teaching Hospital, Lusaka, Zambia

Rabbeca Bwalya[1], Ruth Wahila[2], Emmanuel Musenge[2], Febiano Phiri [3]

[1]St Francis Mission Hospital, Ministry of Health Zambia.
[2]School of Nursing sciences, University of Zambia, Lusaka, Zambia.
[3]School of Nursing and Midwifery Sciences, Eden University, Lusaka, Zambia.

ABSTRACT

Background: Proper nursing care for mechanically ventilated patients is essential to prevent complications such as ventilator-associated pneumonia (VAP) and pressure ulcers. However, adherence to these care practices varies among nurses, impacting patient outcomes.

Objective: To assess nurses' adherence to nursing care practices for ventilated patients and determine the relationship between knowledge and adherence in the adult ICU at the University Teaching Hospital, Lusaka.

Methods: A descriptive cross-sectional study was conducted among 58 ICU nurses using a structured, self-administered questionnaire adapted from the Ventilator Bundle Questionnaire. Descriptive statistics summarized demographic and practice data. Associations were assessed using chi-square and Fisher's exact tests, while binary logistic regression identified predictors of adherence. Statistical significance was set at $p < 0.05$.

Results: Overall, 90% (n = 52) of nurses demonstrated good adherence to ventilated patient care practices. Nurses with degree qualifications were significantly more likely to adhere than those with diplomas (p = 0.033; OR = 4.2, 95% CI: 2.65–6.90). Knowledge level was also significantly associated with adherence (p = 0.025); nurses with adequate knowledge were 4.8 times more likely to adhere (OR = 4.8, 95% CI: 2.43–23.46). Staffing levels were a strong predictor, with well-staffed ICUs showing significantly better adherence (p = 0.013; OR = 7.5, 95% CI: 3.28–17.54). Additionally, 63.8% (n = 37) of participants had adequate knowledge, while 36.2% (n = 21) showed inadequate knowledge.

Conclusion: Adherence to evidence-based nursing care practices for ventilated patients was generally high but influenced by educational level, knowledge, and staffing adequacy. Focused training programs and policy adjustments to improve nurse-to-patient ratios are recommended to enhance adherence and improve patient outcomes.

Corresponding author:
Rabbeca Bwalya,
email address: bekkyedgars@gmail.com

INTRODUCTION

Nursing care practices are essential in ensuring the safety and recovery of ventilated patients in intensive care units (ICUs). These patients require specialized care to prevent complications such as ventilator-associated pneumonia (VAP) and pressure ulcers.[1, 2] Nurses, as frontline caregivers, play a critical role in implementing evidence-based practices that enhance patient outcomes. However, adherence to recommended care practices varies, potentially compromising patient safety.[3, 4] This study examines nurses' adherence to essential care practices for ventilated patients in the Adult ICU at the University Teaching Hospital (UTH) in Lusaka, Zambia.

Globally, millions of ICU patients receive mechanical ventilation annually, incurring substantial healthcare costs.[5] In the U.S., China, and Sweden, the use of mechanical ventilation varies, with significant resource allocation to support critically ill patients.[6, 7] In Africa, disparities exist; South Africa demonstrates high ventilation rates, while Nigeria struggles with limited ventilator availability.[8] In Zambia, approximately 800 patients receive mechanical ventilation annually, with respiratory ailments accounting for 60% of cases.[9, 5] This demand has been rising by 10% each year, necessitating increased government resource allocation.

Mechanical ventilation is crucial for managing conditions such as respiratory failure and acute respiratory distress syndrome (ARDS). However, it poses risks, including VAP, ventilator-induced lung injury (VILI), and barotrauma. VAP results from bacterial infections, emphasizing the need for stringent infection control.[10] VILI and barotrauma, caused by mechanical forces and excessive lung pressure, require careful ventilator settings and vigilant monitoring.[11, 12]

To mitigate these complications, evidence-based nursing care practices such as continuous monitoring, ventilator assessment, proper positioning, infection control, and effective communication are critical.[13, 14] Zambia has implemented training programs and developed local guidelines to enhance ICU care.[15, 16] Despite global research on nursing adherence to ventilated patient care, limited studies exist in Zambia. This study aims to assess nurses' adherence to care practices in the ICU at UTH, providing insights into targeted interventions, training, and quality improvement initiatives.

METHODOLOGY

The study utilized a quantitative, descriptive cross-sectional design to assess adherence to nursing care practices in the ICU at the University Teaching Hospital (UTH) in Lusaka, Zambia. This design was chosen as it allowed for a precise evaluation of nursing practices at a particular point in time, enabling quantification of adherence to evidence-based guidelines (EBGs) and identification of factors influencing these practices. UTH, the largest tertiary healthcare facility in Zambia with a bed capacity of 1655 includes specialized units such as neonatal, pediatric, and adult ICUs, with the adult ICU caring for critically ill patients requiring ventilator support.

The target population comprised 63 nurses in the adult ICU, with 58 (92.1%) agreeing to participate. Inclusion criteria required nurses to have at least six months of ICU experience and direct involvement in ventilator care.

Adherence to nursing care practices was defined as the consistent and effective application of nursing care by nurses managing ventilated patients, including thorough assessment, timely interventions, continuous monitoring, and patient-centered care. Participants were classified as *adherent* if they scored 70% or above on the observation checklist measuring adherence to nursing care practices, and as *non-adherent* if they scored less than 70%. This threshold aligns with standards used in comparable studies evaluating adherence to clinical guidelines, ensuring meaningful differentiation between levels of practice compliance.

A self-administered, structured questionnaire adapted from the Ventilator Bundle Questionnaire (VBQ) was used for data collection. This tool, previously validated in similar settings, covered socio-demographics, knowledge of ventilator care, and adherence to EBGs aimed at preventing ventilator-associated conditions. The VBQ demonstrated excellent internal consistency, with Cronbach's alpha values ranging from 0.99 to 1, indicating a highly reliable measurement instrument. The questionnaire's balanced distribution of difficulty levels and discrimination capacity further supported its validity and reliability for this study.

Ethical approval was obtained from the National Health Research Authority (NHRA) under reference number NHRA-A 749/08/08/2023, and informed consent was obtained from all participants. Confidentiality was maintained throughout the study, with secure data storage practices in place.

Descriptive statistics, including frequencies, percentages, and means, were used to summarize the socio-demographic characteristics of participants. Fisher's exact test was applied to examine associations between adherence and other categorical independent variables. For further analysis, binary logistic regression assessed the impact of factors such as communication quality, knowledge levels, and staffing on adherence to ventilator care practices. Potential confounders, including years of ICU experience and training in ventilator management, were controlled for in the regression model. Odds ratios (ORs) were calculated to estimate the likelihood of adherence based on these factors, with a 95% confidence interval and a significance level of 0.05 to determine statistical associations.

This quantitative approach provided valuable insights into factors influencing adherence to EBGs in the ICU. By using logistic regression, the study highlighted how communication, knowledge, and staffing levels impacted nursing care practices, while controlling for confounders strengthened the reliability of the findings, ensuring accurate attribution of observed effects to the primary factors of interest.

RESULTS

Socio-Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

Table 1 presents the socio-demographic profile of the 58 respondents.

Table 1: Socio-Demographic Characteristics of Respondents (N = 58)

Variables	N	%
Age		
25 - 29 years	7	12.1
30 - 34 years	10	17.2
35 - 39 years	10	17.2
40 - 44 years	15	25.9
45 years and above	16	27.6
Gender		
Male	16	27.6
Female	42	72.4
Marital status		
Unmarried	20	34.5
Married	38	65.5
Level of qualification		
Diploma	52	89.7
Degree	6	10.3
Experience		
Less than 2 years	38	65.5
2 years or more	20	34.5
Total	**58**	**100**

Most respondents were female (72.4%, n=42) and married (65.5%, n=38). The predominant age groups were 40–44 years (25.9%, n=15) and 45 years and above (27.6%, n=16). A majority held a diploma qualification (89.7%, n=52), and most had less than two years of ICU experience (65.5%, n=38).

Adherence to Nursing Care Practices for Ventilated Patients

Adherence was measured using a rating scale with categories: always, frequently, occasionally, and rarely. Responses were consolidated into two groups: good adherence and poor adherence (Table 2).

Table 2: Responses on Adherence to Nursing Care Practices for Ventilated Patients (N=58)

Questions	N	%
Clinical assessment of airway patency to ensure it is clear		
Always	40	69
Frequently	10	17
Occasionally	8	14
Suctioning only when clinical signs indicate the need (e.g., audible secretions, dyspnea)		
Always	58	100%
Applying Aseptic technique during suctioning to prevent infection		
Always	20	34
Frequently	38	66
Using a closed system catheter for suctioning mechanically ventilated patients		
Always	4	07
Occasionally	36	62
Rarely	18	31
Calculating the appropriate size of the suction catheter based on the inner diameter of the endotracheal tube		
Always	13	22
Frequently	36	62
Occasionally	9	16
Maintaining suctioning pressure within the recommended range of 100mmHg-120mmHg		
Always	19	33
Frequently	35	60
Occasionally	4	07
Ensuring suctioning duration does not exceed 15 seconds to minimize oxygen desaturation		
Always	18	31
Frequently	40	69
Pre-oxygenating patients before suctioning to prevent hypoxia		
Always	58	100
Monitoring patient's oxygen saturation and heart rate before, during, and after suctioning		
Always	58	100

Assessing the need for suctioning based on patient -specific criteria rather than routine		
Always	58	100
Adherence Level to Nursing Care Practices for Ventilated Patients		
Good Adherence	52	90
Poor adherence	06	10
Total	**58**	**100**

Adherence to essential ventilator care practices is generally high, particularly for hand hygiene and head elevation, both of which exceeded 80%. Most respondents (90%, n=52) demonstrated good adherence to recommended practices, indicating strong compliance overall. However, gaps remain in areas such as oral care with chlorhexidine and regular monitoring of cuff pressure, where adherence was comparatively lower. These practices are critical for infection prevention and patient safety. Targeted refresher training and increased clinical supervision may help reinforce consistency and address these specific weaknesses.

Knowledge of ICU Nurses on Nursing Care Practices for Ventilated Patients

Knowledge was assessed using ten questions. Scores 70% indicated adequate knowledge; scores <70% indicated inadequate knowledge. Table 3 details the frequency distribution of responses; Figure 1 summarizes overall knowledge levels.

Table 3: Responses on Knowledge of Nursing Care Practices (N=58)

| Questions	Less	Basic	Good	Advanced	Expert
1. Understanding of airway management principles for ventilated patients	0 (0.0%)	6 (10.3%)	29 (50.0%)	14 (24.1%)	9 (15.5%)
2. Knowledge of suctioning techniques and their indications	0 (0.0%)	1(1.7%)	10 (17.2%)	18 (31.0%)	29 (50.0%)
3. Familiarity with aseptic techniques and infection control measures	0 (0.0%)	0(0.0%)	29 (50.0%)	19 (32.8%)	10 (17.2%)
4. Understanding of the use and management of closed system catheters	0 (0.0%)	20 (34.5%)	37 (63.8%)	1 (1.7%)	0 (0.0%)
5. Ability to calculate the correct size of suction catheters	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	19 (32.8%)	32 (55.2%)	7 (12.1%)
6. Knowledge of the recommended suctioning pressure range and its importance	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	18 (31.0%)	32 (55.2%)	8 (13.8%)

7.	Understanding of the guidelines for suctioning duration and frequency	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	29 (50.0%)	16 (27.6%)	13 (22.4%)
8.	Knowledge of pre-oxygenation techniques and their rationale	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	58 (100.0%)	0 (0.0%)
9.	Familiarity with monitoring and assessment techniques for ventilated patients	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	14 (24.1%)	44 (75.9%)
10.	Understanding of current best practices and guidelines for ventilated patient care	0 (0.0%)	15 (25.9%)	22 (37.9%)	9 (15.5%)	12 (20.7%)

were not aware of sedation interruption practices, and 31% had not received recent training. This highlights a need for continuous professional development programs, especially targeting sedation and weaning practices.

Figure 1: Knowledge levels among ICU nurses showed that 63.8% (n=37) had adequate knowledge, while 36.2% (n=21) had inadequate knowledge.

Communication Practices Among ICU Nurses

Communication was assessed with ten Likert-scale questions. Responses were simplified into "Good" or "Bad" communication. Table 4 provides detailed responses, and Figure 2 summarizes overall communication ratings.
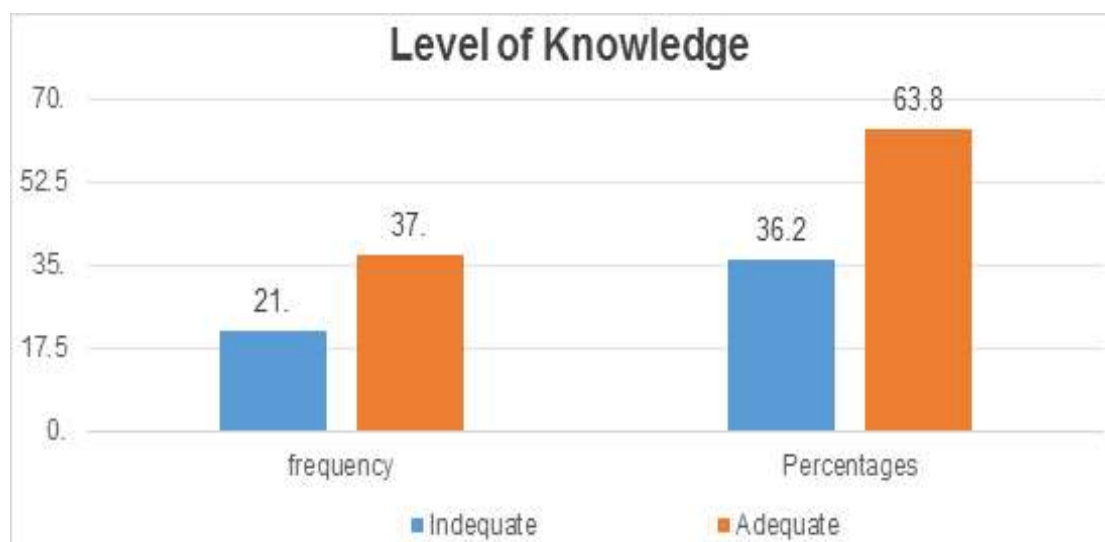
Figure 1: Knowledge on Nursing Care Practices for ventilated patients (N=58)

Table 4: Communication Practices in ICU (N=58)

	Questions	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
1.	The guidelines for nursing care practices in my uni t are communicated clearly.	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	33 (56.9%)	25 (43.1%)	0 (0.0%)
2.	Our team meetings effectively address issues related to nursing care practices.	0 (0.0%)	15 (25.9%)	28 (48.3%)	15 (25.9%)	0 (0.0%)
3.	The communication training I received has ad equately prepared me for my role.	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	39 (67.2%)	19 (32.8%)
4.	The communication channels in place facilitate efficient discussion about patient care.	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	57 (100.0%)	0 (0.0%)
5.	Feedback on nursing care practices is regularly provided and constructively used.	0 (0.0%)	34 (58.6%)	20 (34.5%)	4 (6.9%)	0 (0.0%)
6.	There is open and honest communication among all members of the healthcare team.	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	58 (100%)
7.	I feel comfortable voicing concerns and suggestions related to patient care.	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	58 (100%)
8.	Collaboration with other healthcare professionals is encouraged and facilitated.	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	58 (100%)
9.	Interdisciplinary meetings contribute to the improvement of patient care.	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	24 (41.4%)	34 (58.6%)
10.	Information about changes in nursing care practices is promptly shared with all relevant staff.	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	30 (51.7%)	28 (48.3%)

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The communication assessment showed that 56.9% of respondents were neutral about the clarity of nursing care guidelines, while 43.1% agreed on their effectiveness. In team meetings, 48.3% were neutral about addressing nursing care issues, with equal proportions agreeing and disagreeing. Most respondents (67.2%) felt their communication training had adequately prepared them for their roles.

Figure 2: shows that 48.2% (28) of respondents rated communication among nursing staff in the ICU as good, while slightly over half, at 51.7% (30), reported it as poor.

Staffing Levels of Nurses in the Intensive Care Unit

The staffing situation in the ICU was assessed using a Likert scale, with responses grouped into "Agree" (combining 'agree' and 'strongly agree') and "Disagree" (combining 'neutral,' 'disagree,' and 'strongly disagree'). The detailed responses are presented in Table 5, while overall perceptions of staffing levels are shown in Figure 3.

*Figure 2: Level of Communication Practices among Nurses in ICU (N=58)*

Table 5: Nurse Perceptions of Staffing in the Intensive Care Unit (N = 58)

Questions	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
1. The nurse-to-patient ratio in my unit supports thorough and attentive care.	0 (0.0%)	37 (63.8%)	21 (36.2%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)
2. My workload is manageable and does not compromise the quality of care provided.	0 (0.0%)	27 (46.6%)	23 (39.7%)	8 (13.8%)	0 (0.0%)
3. Our team has a balanced mix of skills and expertise, conducive to high -quality care for ventilated patients.	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	44 (75.9%)	10 (17.2%)	4 (6.9%)
4. The shift lengths in my unit are appropriate and do not negatively impact patient care or staff well-being.	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	37 (63.8%)	21 (36.2%)	0 (0.0%)
5. There are sufficient resources and equipmen t to provide high-quality care to ventilated patients.	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	58 (100.0%)
6. The staffing levels in my unit are adequate to meet the demands of patient care, even in peak times.	6 (10.3%)	41 (70.7%)	11 (19.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)
7. Continuous professional development opportunities are available and encouraged for all staff.	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	42 (72.4%)	16 (27.6%)
8. There is a supportive culture in my unit that prioritizes patient safety and quality care.	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	12 (20.7%)	46 (79.3%)	0 (0.0%)
9. Staff well -being is considered a priority, with measures in place to prevent burnout and stress.	0(0.0%)	13(22.4%)	40(69.0%)	5 (8.6%)	0 (0.0%)
10. Feedback from nursing staff is taken into account when making decisions about the work environment and staffing.	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	58 (100.0%)

Table 5 reveals significant concerns regarding staffing adequacy and workload. A large proportion (63.8%) disagreed that the nurse-to-patient ratio supports thorough care, and nearly half (46.6%) found their workload unmanageable. Nevertheless, all respondents (100%) agreed that equipment and resources were sufficient, suggesting that while infrastructure is adequate, staffing and workload distribution require improvement.
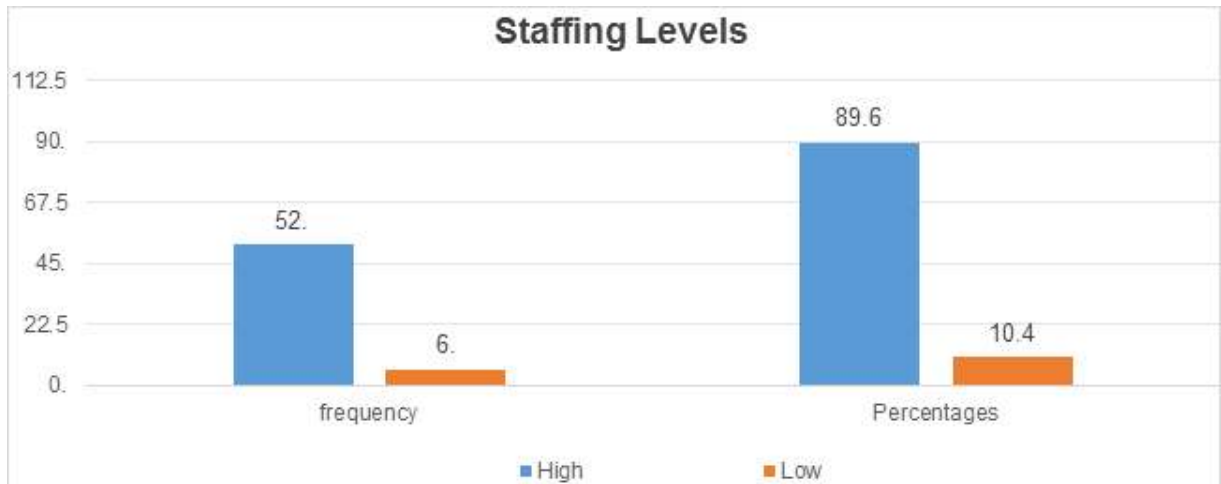
Figure 3: Overall Perception of ICU Staffing Levels (N = 58)

Description: Figure 3 displays that 89.6% (n = 52) of respondents perceived staffing levels as high, while 10.4% (n = 6) perceived them as low.

Statistical Analysis of Factors Associated with Adherence

Table 6: Association Between Independent Variables and Adherence to Nursing Care Practices for Ventilated Patients (N = 58)

	Good Adherence		Poor adherence		
	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage	P-value
Marital status					
Unmarried	1	5	19	95	
Married	5	13.2	33	86.8	0.781[FE]
Qualification					
Diploma	6	11.5	46	88.5	0.038[FE*]
Degree	0	0.0	6	100.0	

Years of Experience					
Less than 2 years	5	13.2	33	86.8	0.158[FE]
2 years or more	1	5.0	19	95.0	
Knowledge					
Inadequate	5	23.8	16	76.2	0.011[FE*]
Adequate	1	2.7	36	97.3	
Communication					
Poor	5	16.7	25	83.3	0.102[FE]
Good	1	3.6	27	96.4	
Staffing					
Low	3	50.0	3	50.0	0.011[FE*]
High	3	5.8	49	94.2	
Total	**6**	**10.3**	**52**	**89.7**	

*Note: FE = Fisher's Exact Test; *p < 0.05 indicates statistical significance.*

Significant associations were found between adherence and qualification (p = 0.038), knowledge (p = 0.011), and staffing levels (p = 0.011), indicating that these variables may influence nurses' adherence to care standards for ventilated patients.

Multivariable Binary Logistic Regression Results

Table 7: Multivariable Logistic Regression Predicting Adherence to Nursing Care Practices for Ventilated Patients (N = 58)

Adherence	UOR	P>z	[95% CI]		AOR	[95% CI]		P>z
Age group								
25 to 29 years	REF				REF			
30 to 34 years	0.475	0.714	0.008	1.454	4.349	0.723	8.762	0.213
35 to 39 years	5.302	0.449	0.070	397.906	3.052	2.027	5.496	3.754
40 to 44 years	1.497	0.848	0.024	12.416	1.001	0.245	7.456	O.432
>45 years	4.067	0.494	0.072	226.873	2.853	0.549	65.749	0.134

Staffing								
Low	REF				REF			
High	10.54	0.122	0.534	208.2	7.532	3.281	4.538	0.013*
Knowledge								
Inadequate	REF				REF			
Adequate	8.523	0.146	0.473	153.4	4.855	12.434	23.456	0.025*
Qualification								
Diploma	REF				REF			
Degree	3.015	2.652	3.190	10.875	4.245	2.6556	6.903	0.033*

AOR =Adjusted odd ratio, UOR= Unadjusted odd ratio, CL= Confidence Interval, P>z= P-values, * Statistical significance.

The results of the multivariable binary logistic regression analysis revealed that nurses with adequate knowledge were significantly more likely to adhere to nursing care practices for ventilated patients compared to those with inadequate knowledge (AOR = 4.86, 95% CI: 12.43–23.46, p = 0.025). Additionally, nurses with a degree qualification were more likely to adhere than those with a diploma (AOR = 4.25, 95% CI: 2.66–6.90, p = 0.033). Furthermore, those working in settings with high staffing levels were significantly more likely to demonstrate adherence to care standards compared to those in low-staffed units (AOR = 7.53, 95% CI: 3.28–4.54, p = 0.013). These findings suggest that knowledge, professional qualifications, and staffing adequacy are significant predictors of adherence to nursing care practices in the ICU.

DISCUSSION

Socio-Demographic Characteristics of the Respondents

The socio-demographic characteristics of nurses play a crucial role in shaping their adherence to nursing care practices, particularly in ICU settings where high-pressure environments demand effective decision-making, problem-solving, and protocol compliance to ensure patient safety and optimal outcomes. Key characteristics, such as gender, age, professional experience, and educational qualifications, significantly influence adherence to these practices. The study found that most respondents (72.4%) were female, which aligns with global trends, as over 70% of ICU staff worldwide are women.[17] This disproportionate female representation in the ICU may lead to gender-specific challenges in workload management, which could affect adherence to care practices. Despite this, the study noted that the adherence rate remained high, with a 10% rate of non-adherence, potentially attributed to the heavy workload that disproportionately impacts female staff. Further research is needed to explore the dynamics of gender-specific workload disparities in ICU settings.

In terms of age, most respondents were aged 40-44 years (25.9%) and 45 years and above (27.6%). These findings suggest a correlation between age, clinical experience, and adherence. Nurses who were younger or had less experience (under two years in the ICU) were found to have lower adherence rates (p = 0.015). This highlights the

importance of mentorship programs and structured onboarding for less experienced staff to enhance adherence to care practices. Educational qualifications also played a significant role, with 89.7% of respondents holding diplomas, and 10.3% having degree-level qualifications. Nurses with degree qualifications were found to be more likely to adhere to nursing care practices, with a 4.25 times higher likelihood of adherence (OR = 4.25, p = 0.033). This supports Wilson *et al.*,[18] who emphasized that advanced education equips nurses with critical thinking skills, enabling them to apply evidence-based practices effectively in high-pressure environments like the ICU. These findings underscore the need for targeted interventions, such as mentorship for less experienced nurses, equitable workload distribution, and opportunities for advanced education to improve adherence and enhance care quality in the ICU.

Adherence to Nursing Care Practices

Adherence to nursing care practices in the ICU at UTH is critical for ensuring patient safety and optimal outcomes for ventilated patients. The study revealed an overall high adherence rate of 90%, demonstrating the commitment of ICU nurses to established protocols. However, the study also highlighted disparities in adherence, particularly for more complex or resource-intensive protocols. Basic practices such as pre-oxygenation and monitoring oxygen saturation showed universal adherence, reflecting their routine nature and critical importance in preventing hypoxia. These practices are emphasized in foundational nursing training and reinforced through clinical supervision. This finding is consistent with Shelledy *et al.*,[19] who also reported high adherence to these basic practices in their ICU study.

In contrast, more complex practices like aseptic techniques (66%) and closed system catheter use (62%) showed comparatively lower adherence. These practices, while equally critical, require additional training, consistent resources, and strict protocol enforcement. The study found that resource availability played a significant role in

adherence, with a slightly higher rate of adherence to closed system catheters (62%) compared to Cox *et al.*,[20] who reported a lower adherence rate of 58% in resource-limited environments. The results indicate that better resource allocation at UTH contributed to higher adherence, though persistent challenges such as supply shortages during peak admission periods were identified.

The study also revealed a statistically significant association between adherence to nursing care practices and participation in CPD activities (p = 0.002), underscoring the importance of ongoing education. CPD programs help nurses maintain compliance with complex protocols. The results also align with Boltey *et al.,*[21] who attributed adherence gaps in aseptic techniques to resource constraints and irregular training. The study's findings emphasize the need for continuous professional development (CPD) to address gaps in adherence.

The PARiHS framework, used to guide this study, highlights the interaction between evidence, context, and facilitation in promoting adherence. Evidence-based guidelines on practices like aseptic techniques are crucial, but their implementation is often hindered by contextual factors such as resource limitations and inconsistent training. Facilitation through CPD programs and mentorship helps bridge the gap between evidence and practice, promoting adherence.

Furthermore, adherence to nursing care practices has broader implications for healthcare costs and patient outcomes. Poor adherence can lead to complications such as ventilator-associated pneumonia (VAP), which increases morbidity, prolongs ICU stays, and raises healthcare costs. Studies such as Boltey *et al.*,[21] have demonstrated that adherence to infection control practices reduces the incidence of VAP and can be cost-effective. By improving adherence to complex practices, institutions can enhance patient safety, reduce complications, and achieve quality improvement goals.

While the overall adherence rate in UTH's ICU is commendable, there is a need for targeted

interventions to address gaps in adherence to complex practices. Strategies like mandatory CPD, enhanced resource allocation, and the integration of evidence-based guidelines into routine practice are recommended. These efforts should be supported by a conducive context and facilitation mechanisms to ensure sustainable improvements in nursing care practices

Knowledge Levels of ICU Nurses on Adherence to Nursing Care Practices

Knowledge is a crucial component in ensuring adherence to nursing care practices, particularly in intensive care units (ICUs), where complex procedures are routine. The findings of this study strongly support the relationship between higher knowledge levels and better adherence to nursing care protocols. Nurses with higher knowledge were significantly more likely to follow established practices ($p = 0.025$). Adequate knowledge allows nurses to understand and implement evidence-based protocols effectively, reducing the potential for errors and improving patient outcomes.

In this study, 63.8% of ICU nurses demonstrated adequate knowledge, while 36.2% exhibited gaps, particularly in critical areas like closed system catheter management and suction pressure settings. These knowledge gaps are consistent with findings from Frank et al.,[22] who reported that nurses with adequate knowledge were more than twice as likely to adhere to protocols compared to those with knowledge deficits ($p = 0.025$). This highlights a strong, consistent connection between knowledge and adherence, emphasizing the importance of targeted education to close knowledge gaps and ensure uniform application of care practices.

Continuous professional development (CPD) has been shown to mitigate knowledge gaps and improve adherence rates. Gonzalez and Ramirez[23] demonstrated that CPD increased adherence to nursing practices by 20% among participating nurses ($p = 0.002$). This study supports similar findings, indicating that nurses who engage in CPD are better equipped with both theoretical knowledge

and practical skills to handle complex clinical situations. This suggests that CPD programs should be mandatory, focusing on areas with the most significant knowledge gaps, such as aseptic techniques, closed system catheter management, and suctioning procedures, to foster comprehensive improvement in adherence.

Access to education is critical in maintaining high adherence rates, particularly in resource-limited settings. Kagame et al.[24] identified a significant but weaker link between knowledge and adherence ($p = 0.005$) compared to this study, which found a stronger association ($p = 0.001$). This discrepancy may be attributed to the targeted and structured training programs implemented at the University Teaching Hospital (UTH) in Zambia, which appear to be addressing knowledge disparities more effectively. This highlights the importance of institutional support for ongoing education and ensuring that resources are allocated equitably to facilitate knowledge acquisition across nursing staff.

The study further revealed that nurses with adequate knowledge were 4.8 times more likely to adhere to nursing care practices than those with inadequate knowledge (OR = 4.8, 95% CI: 12.43 –23.46), $p = 0.025$). This finding aligns with the results from Wilson et al.[18], who found that adequate knowledge among ICU nurses significantly reduced complications like ventilator-associated pneumonia (VAP), a common and serious issue in critical care settings. Knowledge-driven adherence, therefore, plays a pivotal role in preventing complications and improving patient care outcomes.

The Promoting Action on Research Implementation in Health Services (PARiHS) framework helps contextualize these findings by emphasizing the need for a supportive "context" in which knowledge can be effectively applied. Knowledge is the "evidence" component of the framework, which underscores the importance of research-based evidence and clinical expertise in guiding best practices. However, knowledge alone is insufficient to ensure adherence; a supportive environment

through resources, mentorship, and organizational support is necessary for translating knowledge into action.

Practical implications of knowledge gaps are particularly relevant in areas like catheter management and suction pressures, where deficiencies can increase the risk of infections and complications such as VAP. Studies by Boltey *et al.*,[21] and Shelledy *et al.*,[19] show that improving knowledge in aseptic techniques and suctioning practices can reduce VAP incidence and other respiratory complications. Boltey *et al.*,[21] reported a 30% reduction in VAP by improving adherence to aseptic protocols, while Shelledy *et al*[19] found that addressing knowledge gaps in suctioning techniques led to a 20% decrease in respiratory complications.

In conclusion, addressing knowledge gaps is essential for improving adherence to nursing care practices in ICUs. This study underscores the need for structured, accessible, and targeted education programs, such as CPD, mentorship, and resource allocation, to equip nurses with the knowledge and skills needed to maintain high standards of care, particularly for critically ill patients. To achieve sustained improvements in nursing practice, institutions must prioritize investment in educational programs and create a supportive environment that fosters continuous learning and knowledge translation.

Qualification Levels of ICU Nurses and Their Impact on Adherence to Nursing Care Practices

Qualification is a key determinant of professional competence, with higher qualification levels significantly influencing adherence to nursing care practices, particularly in critical care. The study found that nurses with higher qualifications were 4.2 times more likely to adhere to nursing protocols compared to those with lower qualifications (AOR = 4.245, p = 0.033). Advanced qualifications provide specialized skills and deeper knowledge, enabling nurses to implement evidence-based practices effectively and improve patient outcomes. Previous research corroborates these findings. Merez *et al*.[25]

emphasized that degree-qualified nurses possess better critical thinking skills, which enhance their ability to implement evidence-based interventions. Similarly, Gonzalez and Ramirez[23] demonstrated that continuous professional development, linked to higher qualifications, improves adherence to care protocols. These results align with the current study, show that degree-qualified nurses perform better in adhering to practices for ventilated patients.

Patel and Morgan[26] also found that ICU nurses with advanced qualifications demonstrated better problem-solving and decision-making skills, leading to improved adherence to protocols. Postgraduate nurses, for instance, showed 30% higher adherence to aseptic techniques (p = 0.001), reflecting the importance of advanced education in critical care settings. Degree programs typically provide advanced theoretical knowledge and clinical decision-making skills, improving nurses' ability to manage complex ICU cases, which supports the findings of Frank *et al*.[22] Using the Promoting Action on Research Implementation in Health Services (PARiHS) framework, qualifications contribute to the "evidence" component, which enables nurses to navigate complex ICU contexts. Degree-qualified nurses are better equipped to serve as change agents, facilitating the adoption of evidence-based practices and mentoring their peers. They are also more likely to engage in interdisciplinary collaboration, enhancing their ability to implement comprehensive care plans.

Despite the benefits of higher qualifications, the study revealed that 89.7% of ICU nurses at UTH hold diplomas, with only 10.3% having degree qualifications. This disparity may hinder adherence to care practices, suggesting the need for targeted interventions, such as promoting advanced education and professional development. Kalaba *et al*.,[27] also advocates for educational reforms to improve care quality in resource-limited settings. In conclusion, advancing the educational qualifications of ICU nurses is crucial for improving adherence to nursing care practices and optimizing patient outcomes. Healthcare institutions should prioritize

educational initiatives to enhance the competencies of nursing staff, ensuring high-quality care in critical settings.

Staffing Levels and Adherence to Nursing Care Practices

Staffing levels emerged as a significant factor influencing adherence to nursing care practices in the ICU. Most respondents (70.7%) reported inadequate staffing, with high nurse-to-patient ratios and excessive workloads being frequently cited as barriers. Statistical analysis showed a significant association between staffing levels and adherence (p = 0.013), emphasizing the direct impact of staffing on the quality of care provided. Staffing suggests that inadequate staffing reduces the time nurses can dedicate to each patient, leading to deviations from protocols, particularly in complex procedures like aseptic techniques and advanced monitoring.

This study's findings align with the work of Garcia and Rodriguez[28], who also observed that insufficient staffing was a key determinant of non-adherence, reporting a similar p-value of 0.004. They highlighted that balanced nurse-to-patient ratios not only improve adherence to protocols but also help reduce errors and enhance patient safety. Similarly, Kabongo and Mwewa[29] reported similar results with a p-value of 0.003, showing that overburdened nurses are less likely to prioritize critical care practices, which increases the risk of complications, such as ventilator-associated pneumonia (VAP).

Ng'andu et al.[30] provided additional insights into the role of staffing in resource-limited settings, finding that strategic staff allocation, even with insufficient numbers, could improve adherence (p = 0.005). Their study, however, revealed a slightly weaker association, likely due to differences in organizational policies and available resources. For example, they implemented flexible task delegation to non-nursing staff to mitigate some of the effects of inadequate staffing. In comparison, this study found that high staffing levels significantly increased adherence, with well-staffed ICUs seeing adherence rates 7.5 times higher than poorly staffed units (OR =

7.5, 95% CI: 3.28–4.54, p = 0.013). These findings align with Mitchell et al.[31], who observed that low nurse-to-patient ratios increase workloads, reduce care quality, and lead to higher error rates.

In this study, insufficient staffing not only compromised adherence to nursing care practices but also contributed to nurse burnout, which indirectly impacted patient outcomes. Research, including that by Mitchell *et al.*[31], has demonstrated that burnout is correlated with decreased attention to detail and reduced compliance with protocols. This highlights the cascading effect of staffing shortages, where workload challenges eventually lead to broader systemic issues, affecting both patient safety and nurse well-being.

The implications of these findings are significant. Policy-level interventions are urgently needed to address staffing shortages, especially in critical care settings. First, nurse-to-patient ratios must be optimized to ensure sufficient time for protocol adherence. Evidence from Garcia and Rodriguez[28] suggests that a 1:1 or 1:2 nurse-to-patient ratio in high-acuity settings significantly improves adherence and reduces complications. Second, healthcare institutions should focus on retaining experienced nurses, who are more likely to adhere to protocols and mentor less experienced colleagues, as noted by Kabongo and Mwewa.[29] Third, flexible staffing models, such as task-shifting or the use of specialized support staff, could help alleviate some of the workload pressures, as recommended by Ng'andu *et al.*[30] Resource allocation should also prioritize tools and technologies that support adherence despite staffing shortages. For example, introducing automated monitoring systems or workflow-enhancing technologies could reduce manual workloads, enabling nurses to focus more on patient care. Furthermore, training programs tailored to high-demand environments, such as those proposed by Wahila[32], could help nurses manage their responsibilities more effectively without compromising adherence.

Communication Practices and Adherence to Nursing Care Practices

Effective communication is crucial for teamwork in the ICU and plays a role in adherence to nursing care practices. However, this study found that communication practices were not significantly associated with adherence to care practices (p = 0.102). While all respondents acknowledged that interdisciplinary meetings contributed to improved patient care, feedback mechanisms and team meetings addressing nursing care practices were rated less favorably, with respondents giving neutral or negative feedback. The statistical analysis revealed a weak negative association between communication practices and adherence (p = 0.05).

Cultural and linguistic differences emerged as potential barriers to effective communication. Fernández *et al*.[33] observed a weaker association between communication and adherence (p = 0.010) in their study, likely due to the implementation of bilingual protocols designed to address these challenges. The weaker association in this study (p = 0.05) suggests that while communication is an important element of nursing care, its direct impact on adherence may vary depending on context and other influencing factors.

The findings regarding communication are consistent with the work of Rodriguez *et al*.,[34] who identified poor communication as a major barrier to adherence in ICU settings. Their study found a significant association (p = 0.006), highlighting the importance of structured communication protocols like SBAR (Situation, Background, Assessment, Recommendation). These protocols help ensure clarity, minimize misunderstandings, and support timely decision-making, which are essential for maintaining high adherence levels in the fast-paced ICU environment.

The study's conceptual framework, the Promoting Action on Research Implementation in Health Services (PARiHS) framework, offers further insight into the role of communication in adherence. Effective communication is linked to the "facilitation" component of the framework, which emphasizes support mechanisms that enable the practical application of evidence-based practices. Interdisciplinary collaboration and structured feedback mechanisms serve as facilitators that create an environment conducive to adherence. Conversely, the absence of these facilitators can hinder adherence, especially in complex and resource-constrained settings.

In conclusion, while communication practices may positively influence adherence to nursing care practices, the study indicates that gaps in feedback mechanisms and the inconsistent use of standardized tools must be addressed. Interdisciplinary collaboration remains a strength, but improving feedback processes and implementing structured communication protocols will help ensure consistent adherence to care protocols across ICU settings.

STRENGTHS AND LIMITATIONS

Strengths

This study's strengths enhance its validity and relevance to ICU nursing practices. The use of a structured, validated data collection tool ensured consistency, reliability, and alignment with international ICU nursing care standards. The study's focus on a critical care setting allowed for the identification of key factors such as knowledge gaps and communication barriers, which impact adherence to nursing care practices. Statistical analysis provided strong evidence linking socio-demographic factors, knowledge, communication, and staffing levels to adherence. Additionally, the findings offer practical implications for improving nursing education, administrative policies, and clinical practices in ICUs.

Limitations

The study was conducted at a single institution, potentially limiting the generalizability of findings to other settings. Its cross-sectional design captured adherence at a single point, restricting causal interpretations. Self-reported data may have

introduced response bias, though measures like anonymity and neutral questionnaire wording minimized this risk. Resource and time constraints limited the study's scope, excluding variables like organizational culture and patient outcomes. However, the study focused on key, actionable factors, with recommendations for future research to expand on these findings.

CONCLUSION

The study found high adherence to ICU nursing care practices among nurses. Key factors influencing adherence included years of experience, level of education, and training in ICU care. Nurses with more experience and higher education levels demonstrated better adherence. While overall adherence was high, some variations existed, highlighting the need for continuous training and mentorship programs. Addressing any remaining barriers could further improve nursing care quality. Future studies should explore other potential influencing factors, such as institutional support and resource availability, to provide a more comprehensive understanding of adherence trends.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest in this study.

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