



Georgia

Emergency Department
St John of God, Murdoch Hospital

How long have you been a Registered Nurse and worked in the Emergency Department?

I have been a Registered Nurse for 20 years. After qualifying I completed a graduate program at Kalgoorlie Regional Hospital that involved four rotations, with the final rotation being in the ED. I have continued to work as an ED nurse ever since.

What do you enjoy about working in the ED?

I really enjoy the variety that ED nursing offers. We look after such a wide spectrum of patients in the ED so we have to be knowledgeable in most areas of healthcare. "We are a jack of all trades" so to speak. I think this is one of the key skills of ED clinicians to have sound clinical skills, especially when it comes to health assessment. I like the fast-pace of ED nursing, although it can be demanding at times, which challenges both your time management and organisational skills. Your day is always unpredictable and never the same.

I have a huge respect for the team I work with and enjoy getting to know my patients. We are privileged to nurse patients from a variety of backgrounds and cultures. ED nurses are also part of the wider community services. We work closely with the Police and St John Ambulance Service.

What does an average day involve?

There is no "average" day. Everyday is different. We do however still have processes that we follow. My day would depend on where I am working (coordinating the department, triage, working on the floor). I will describe a typical day on the floor. Firstly, I would receive a handover from the outgoing nurse and be

introduced to my patients. I would usually have a load of four patients at a time. It does not sound like a lot but it keeps me going. After having a handover, I then need to think about how I will prioritise my care which involves assessing the individual care needs for each of my patients. This can be quite complex as patients are often acutely unwell and at risk of deteriorating. I use a structured and methodical approach (A-E) and constantly monitor my patients for any changes. I am able to interpret these with a good knowledge base that allows me to interpret laboratory results, radiological investigations and other diagnostics (spirometry etc.).

Patients tend to move through the department fairly quickly as they are either discharged home or admitted to a ward, so I have to be able to keep up with having new patients to look after every couple of hours or so. I can have up to 15 different patients in one shift, depending on their acuity.

Can you describe some of the challenges that you face working in the ED and how do you overcome these?

Shift work can be tiring and quite demanding as you are required to work both day and night shifts. This can be difficult when it comes to you having a social life and personal commitments. To try and manage this I try to do as much advanced planning as I can, such as ensuring roster requests are entered in early etc. For the “emergencies” that cannot be planned for, I work in a supportive team and shift swaps are definitely an option.

The mental demand of critically processing information and problem solving potentially serious issues can result in mental fatigue. This can affect life outside of work. Ensuring plenty of holidays are booked and that life remains in balance is the best strategy. I have found keeping fit a great way to ensure I am able to function at a high level for extended periods.

You will likely be saddened by some of the things that you will see. The emergency setting can be a traumatic environment for both patients and staff. Debriefing with other colleagues and the sense of comradery within the various teams I have worked in are strategies for helping deal with the emotional stress.

Can you describe the skill set required for working as a registered nurse in the ED and how you are supported in these?

Communication skills – these are essential in order to be an effective emergency nurse. There can be time dependent situations where clear communication is key to the ED working together efficiently. Written skills are a necessity to ensure comprehensive documentation, which is a legal necessity. Both effective written and verbal communication avoids potential errors.

The communication style of an ED nurse has to be compassionate and yet concise. This is an artful element of ED nursing. Despite the challenge of stressed resources, ED nurses pride themselves on the quality of care they provide for their patients. As demand has increased, we have utilised other resources such as developing the PCA role and using volunteers to assist with care delivery. The way we communicate provides a strong foundation for excellent patient care, but it's those “finishing touches” such as warmed blankets or refreshments that can really comfort patients during their experience.

Assessment skills – ED nurses critically analyse information from a variety of sources when assessing patients. They use all senses (sight, smell, touch, hearing), consider diagnostic information (radiological and pathology reports) and consult family for a complete assessment. Sometimes our assessments have to be done promptly and this can be challenging when not all information can be accessed.

Technical skills – A wide spectrum of technical skills are required when working in an ED. This goes hand in hand with the variety of patients we care for. This can range from interpreting an ECG, setting up IV infusions, application of a plaster to a fractured limb, complex wound dressings, chest auscultation and insertion of IV cannulas to name a few.

Advanced resuscitative skills – This set of skills is unique to the ED setting and are developed with experience. After most resuscitations, the ED team will debrief and use this as an opportunity to discuss emotions that may need to be acknowledged and identify learning needs. Some of our training is focused on this

learning area and we are encouraged to do courses such as Advanced Life Support and the Trauma Nursing Core Course. These courses help clinicians approach stressful clinical situations using a methodical and unanimous approach.

Organisational skills – The ED requires all team members to be organised. The organisational skills often determine how successfully someone can function in an ED. This is how staff control potentially chaotic situations. These skills prepare us for an array of emergencies and ensure good patient / department flow. They assist us work to work efficiently and time management skills would be included in this skill set.

Critical thinking skills – Is an essential that ED nurses are able to critically think as we always have to question what we are doing and why. We use this skill formally by analysing research findings but also in our practice. It is a unique individual who can continue to critically analyse information in a stressful environment. This skill allows for correct diagnostics and ensures patient safety.

Risk and OSH skills – The ED is not exempt from quality standards that are set by national bodies. It is a requirement that we partake in continual improvement, especially as the ED is an area of high-risk due to factors such as potentially aggressive situations, a highly stressful work environment and the need to make time dependent decisions and actions. We manage risk with various policies and processes that aim to create a safe working environment and ensure practice is universal.

What are some examples of clinical presentations you see and how do you provide safe and high-quality nursing care in this fast-paced clinical environment?

In the ED we see a wide variety of health issues first hand. Some of the common presentations that we see are:

- Chest pain

- Abdominal pain – commonly UTI, appendicitis, cholelithiasis (gallbladder issues), pancreatitis or diverticulitis
- Kidney stones
- Back pain
- Respiratory tract infections – often asthma and COPD
- STI resulting from sports – ankles, knees etc.
- Dislocations
- Eye problems
- Lacerations requiring glue or sutures
- Head injuries
- Cellulitis
- Mild to severe (multisystem) traumas

To ensure my practice remains safe, I am always aware of the necessity to prioritise care. This has come with experience in triaging and assessing patients. Even though pain is debilitating and needs treating some patients experiencing chest pain can potentially have a life-threatening presentation. Empowering family to help as much as possible is another strategy that not only empowers relatives but also can often result in better patient care.

Can you recall a memorable incident that really captures your role as an ED nurse?

My favourite triage story always comes to mind. It is not particularly glamorous, most people like to hear a gory resus story but this is a simple presentation but one of my favourite.

A man presented to the triage desk after having traumatically amputating his hand. He sat down in front of me, pale as a ghost and his hand in a Chinese container on ice. I put the container down on the ground next to me, out of the man's view. I then asked him his name and started talking to him about my mum's dog. I asked him if he had a dog. He did, and then I asked numerous questions about his dog. From what type of dog he was, did he eat a lot of food? What was his name? Etc. He became very angry at the apparent lack of my interest in his presenting complaint.

He became flushed and verbally aggressive. It was at this point I asked him to walk over to a stretcher and that we would take him into the department to be seen.

The treating Dr (who I know well) came to see me later to tell me he was surprised to hear that the patient wanted to put a complaint in about me. He asked if the nurse at the front knew what she was doing. When the Dr asked me what happened I explained that he was shocked when he first came to the triage desk. I got him angry to get his BP up so he could walk to the stretcher without fainting. It was quite clear why he had come! I was avoiding having to pick him up off the floor since he weighed about 120kg!

This story depicts the calmness a good nurse must have in potentially stressful and confronting situations. It also demonstrates acute assessment skills that ED nurses have, even through a window. It shows by having a good understanding of physiological body processes we can use this to benefit patients. In the story, the patient's pride is protected and the patient was empowered as much as possible without realising it. Finally, the strategies ED nurses use must be unique, individualised to the situation and above all the nurse must always retain their sense of humour.

What learning opportunities does the ED provide for you as an aspiring ED Registered Nurse?

I am currently pursuing my Nurse Practitioner studies. I have actively sought learning opportunities throughout my career that has essentially been centred on emergency nursing. These have included management opportunities, leading major change projects, being involved in quality activities and various teaching roles. Junior ED nurses tend to have a focus on technical skills but as you develop, there are plenty of opportunities to pursue as a senior nurse and in the capacity as a nurse leader. Like most clinical areas, the research and evidenced based practice never ends, to remain current there is always plenty of reading to do and courses to attend.

ED skills are desirable in many varied clinical setting. I have been fortunate to gain rural employment, worked my way around Australia and have worked overseas in

the cruise ship industry. I was fortunate to gain a management position as a Hospital Coordinator early on in my career; I still believe this was because of my ED background. Any positions that require a degree of autonomy will list emergency experience as essential criteria and it will be highly regarded.

A final word...

My advice to students would be it is important to go to the ED with a willingness to learn. As a teacher and a senior RN, nothing is more demotivating than a lethargic student! It may seem at times that all you do is obs, but by supporting your preceptor, it may give them more time to be able to support you! A good work ethic will be noticed by other team members and your experience will be all the better for it.

If you do struggle with the chaos and pace, STAY CALM. You will not be expected to function any more than at student nurse level. Most ED's require that in order to work there nurses have a minimum of 2 years postgraduate experience. This is to allow inexperienced nurses to consolidate their basic skills so they can have a good foundation to build on. The staff will understand you are developing your basic nursing skills and you will not be expected to do any more than that.

Remember your scope of practice is important. It will keep your patients safe, you safe and the organisation safe. As tempting as it may be to try to practice at a more advanced level, remember there may be serious implications all round for everyone!

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