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Primary care patients in the emergency department: a comparative study of the social representations of nursing staff in Australia and France

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**PRIMARY CARE PATIENTS IN THE EMERGENCY DEPARTMENT.
A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF THE SOCIAL REPRESENTATIONS OF
NURSING STAFF IN AUSTRALIA AND FRANCE.**

A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the award of the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

from

THE UNIVERSITY OF WOLLONGONG

by

WILLIAM GEORGE JANES

Graduate School of Public Health
Faculty of Health and Behavioural Sciences

CERTIFICATE.

I, William George Janes, declare that this thesis is wholly my work unless otherwise referenced or acknowledged. The document has not been submitted for qualifications of any other academic institution.

Signed: _____

Date: 28th March 2002

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this research was to study the thoughts and feelings of nursing staff towards primary care patients seeking treatment in emergency departments rather than visiting a General Practitioner in the community. Anecdotal information and information gained from literature suggested that there are very negative feelings towards patients who use the emergency care services for minor problems. This appears to have been an unresolved problem since at least the middle of the 19th century when writers commented negatively on this practice of people attending hospitals. Importantly, for contemporary nursing practice, these thoughts and feelings may have implications for the care received by patients.

Grounded Theory was used to direct the collection, organisation and the analysis of the data. The methods included participant observation, interviews and the administration of a questionnaire. The theory of social representation, originally developed by Moscovici in 1961, was used to determine, describe and analyse the thoughts and feelings of nursing staff towards primary care patients attending emergency departments. This allowed a more complex and dynamic picture to emerge which substantially enhanced the findings of previous studies.

The study was a comparative one between nursing staff in Australia and France. Are the thoughts and feelings of emergency nurses in other parts of the developed world towards primary care patients similar to those of English speaking countries, or do history, language and culture lead to different ideas and ways of dealing with primary care patients? Social representation theory was originally developed in France, though it has also been used in research in many variations of social research so it was

an appropriate way to compare the contrast the thoughts and feelings of the two groups of nurses in a consistent way. It was found, despite differences in organisation and culture, that emergency nurses in France and Australia have remarkably similar thoughts and feelings towards primary care patients. The model of social representation was able to evaluate why this is so.

The results indicate that the thoughts and feelings of the staff in both countries are changeable and inconsistent; sometimes they are negative, as other studies have shown, but sometimes they are more positive, acknowledging the social and community roles of the emergency departments. The model of social representations, which this study develops, is able to show that many incoming stimuli go towards the thoughts and feelings of the staff at any one time. The final pathway of thought is influenced not only by the social conditioning of the individual, and the individual's cognitive make-up, but also by environmental inputs. The strengths of the incoming stimuli at any one time are the determinants of the thoughts and feelings of emergency nursing staff towards primary care patients.

The thesis concludes with a discussion of the roles of the emergency department and the educational needs of emergency staff. The effective management of primary care patients is of great importance and it is hoped that the comparative findings will lead to fruitful developments in management techniques and policy.

TABLE OF CONTENTS.	Page
Certificate	ii
Aknowledgements	iii
Abstract	iv
Table Of Contents.	vi
List Of Tables.	x
List Of Figures.	xi
Glossary Of Acronyms	xiii
Chapter One - Introduction	1
1.1 Introduction	1
1.2 Rationale for the Study	3
1.3 Background to the study	4
1.4 Definition of Problems	7
1.5 Cross National Comparisons	10
1.6 Theoretical Models Underpinning the Study	14
1.7 Key Research Questions	17
1.7.1 Question One	17
1.7.2 Question Two	17
1.8 Summary of Chapter One	18
1.9 Structure of Thesis	19
Chapter Two – Theoretical Framework of Social Representations.	22
2.1 Introduction	22
2.2 History of Social Representations	22
2.3 Social Representations	24
2.4 Subject and Object	29
2.5 Rationale for Using the Theory of Social Representations	33
2.6 Summary of Chapter Two	33
Chapter Three – Australian and French Health Care Systems and Emergency Departments.	35
3.1 Introduction	35
3.2 French Health Care System	36
3.3 Australian Health Care System	46
3.4 Emergency Departments in France and Australia	55
3.5 Summary of Chapter Three	58
Chapter Four – Primary Care Patients	60
4.1 Introduction.	60

4.2	Primary Health Care in Emergency Departments	60
4.3	Definition of Primary Care Patients	61
4.4	Presenting Diagnostic Complaint	63
4.5	Reasons for Choosing the Emergency Department	64
4.6	Age and Gender	65
4.7	Other Facilities Unavailable	66
4.8	Social Class	66
4.9	Referrals	67
4.10	Miscellaneous	67
4.11	Health Belief Model	68
4.12	Inappropriate Attenders	70
4.13	Social Worth	72
4.14	Medical, Intellectual and Mobilisation Worth	75
4.15	Patients are Regarded as Inappropriate , Rubbish or Trivia	78
4.16	The Feelings and Delays and Waiting Times Increase	82
4.17	Role Perception of Staff Members	83
4.18	Abuse of Emergency Departments by Other Agents	83
4.19	Summary of Chapter Four	84
Chapter Five – Methodology		85
5.1	Introduction	85
5.2	Methodological Orientation for the Study	85
5.3	Validity and Reliability	90
5.4	Method in Action	92
5.5	Demographic Information	93
5.5.1	Demographic Information – France	93
5.5.2	Demographic Information – Australia	94
5.6	Research Design	95
5.7	Stage One: Research Orientation	96
5.8	Stage Two:	98
5.8.1	Phase One: Commencement of Field Work in France	98
5.8.2	Phase Two: Return to Venues in France	101
5.9	Stage Three: New South Wales, Australia	103
5.10	Stage Four: Analysis of Data	104
5.11	Stage Five: Discussion and Conclusion	104
5.12	Summary of Chapter Five	105
Chapter Six – Findings		107
6.1	Introduction	107
6.2	Participant Observation Data	111
6.2.1	Hospital and ED structures	111
6.2.2	Major Roles for Staff in Emergency Departments	115
6.2.3	Staff Movements	115
6.2.4	Activity	116
6.2.5	Patient Behaviours	118
6.3	Interview Data – France	125
6.3.1	Reflections About Emergency Departments	126

6.3.2	Population/ Social / Financial	130
6.3.3	Abuse of the System	135
6.3.4	General Practitioners	138
6.4	Emotional Direction of the Themes in the Interviews	140
6.5	Questionnaire Analysis	142
6.5.1	Abuse of the System	143
6.5.2	Reflections of Emergency Departments	144
6.5.3	General Practitioners	147
6.5.4	Knowledge of Problem	150
6.6	Emotion Direction of the Themes in the Questionnaires	151
6.7	Combined Interview and Questionnaire Data	152
6.8	Analysis of Australian Interview Data	156
6.8.1	Reflections in Emergency Departments and Primary Care Patients.	157
6.8.1.1	Relating to the Use of GP Services	158
6.8.1.2	Staff Specific Issues	160
6.8.1.3	Overcrowding	161
6.8.1.4	Legal Implications / Constraints and Consequences	162
6.8.1.5	Reflections About Primary Care Patients	163
6.8.1.6	Role of Emergency Departments	164
6.8.1.7	Alternatives to Emergency Departments	165
6.8.1.8	Aggression	166
6.8.2	General Practice Patients	167
6.8.2.1	Wrong Venue for General Practice Patients	168
6.8.2.2	A Necessary Service	169
6.8.2.3	Dissatisfaction with the Service	170
6.8.2.4	Mismanagement of Patients In Emergency Departments	170
6.8.2.5	Changing Focus of General Practice Services	171
6.8.2.6	Nurses' Role in Emergency Departments	171
6.8.3	Role of the Emergency Department	173
6.8.3.1	Emergency and General Practice Care	173
6.8.3.2	Many Roles	174
6.8.3.3	Emergency Care Only	175
6.8.4	Abuse / Inappropriate Use of Emergency Departments	176
6.8.4.1	Primary Care Patients are Inappropriate	177
6.8.4.2	Aggression in Emergency Departments	177
6.8.4.3	Dumping Ground	178
6.8.4.4	Leg Work for Specialists	178
6.9	Collective French and Australian Data	180
6.10	Summary of Chapter Six	182
Chapter Seven – Discussion and Conclusion		185
7.1	Introduction	185
7.2	Developing Models of Emergency Care and PCPs.	186
7.2.1	Model of Thoughts and Feelings Held by Emergency Nurses.	186
7.2.1.1	Complexity.	188
7.2.1.2	Contradictions, Certainties and Uncertainties.	189
7.2.1.3	Consistency of Thoughts and Feelings.	189

7.3 2	Emergency Care and EDs.	191
7.2.2.1	Stakeholders.	196
7.2.2.2	Governments and Area / Hospital Administrations.	196
7.2.2.3	General Practitioners.	197
7.2.2.4	Local Communities.	199
7.3	Further Discussion of Research Questions.	201
7.4	Limitations.	202
7.5	Implications for the Future.	206
7.5.1	Continuation of PCPs in ED	206
7.5.2	Administrative changes.	207
7.5.3	Education for staff.	208
7.6	Summary of Chapter Seven.	208
References		211
Appendix 1	Consent Form	225
Appendix 2	Questions and Questionnaire	226
Appendix 3	Correspondence	231
Appendix 4	Human Research Ethics Committee Approvals.	248

LIST OF TABLES.

TABLE		Page
4.1	Diagnostic Groups Attending the Emergency Department.	64
4.2	Reason for choosing the emergency department.	65
5.1.	Regions and Hospitals visited in France during Phase One	93
5.2.	Details of Subjects Interviewed in France during Phase Two.	94
5.3	Details of Subjects Given Questionnaires in France during Phase Two.	94
5.4	Regions and Hospitals visited in Australia during Phase Three.	95
5.5	Subjects Interviewed in Australia during Phase Three.	95
6.1	Frequency of Emerging Themes from the French Interviews	126
6.2	Themes Within Categories Rated as Positive, Negative or Neutral	141
6.3	Analysis of Questionnaire Responses	142
6.4.	Questionnaire Themes Within Categories Rated as Positive, Negative or Neutral	152
6.5	Frequency of Emerging Themes from the Combined French Interview and Questionnaire Data.	153
6.6	Quantified Responses of Australian Interview Transcripts	157
6.7	Sub-Categories of Themes Within the Main Category of Reflections of Emergency Departments and Primary Care Patients.	158
6.8	Sub-categories of Themes within the Main Categories of Relation to General Practice Patients in Emergency Departments.	168
6.9	Sub Categories of Themes within the Main Category of Role of Emergency Departments.	173
6.10	Sub-Categories of Themes within the Main Category of Abuse / Inappropriate Use of Emergency Services.	176

LIST OF FIGURES.

FIGURE		Page
2.1	Basic Model of Social Representations.	31
6.1	Conclusions of Similarities Between Primary Care Patients in France and Australia.	109
6.2	Conclusions of Similarities Between Nursing Staff Working in France and Australia.	110
6.3	Basic Model of Social Representations.	111
6.4	Environmental Influences Observed During Participant Observations.	123
6.5	Social and Cognitive Influences on the Social Representations.	124
6.6	Collective Social Representations of EDs – French.	139
6.7	Collective SRs of Population, Social and Financial Characteristics – French.	134
6.8	Collective SRs of Abuse of the System – French.	137
6.9	Collective SRs of General Practitioners – French.	139
6.10	Collective SRs of Abuse of the System – French Questionnaire.	144
6.11	Collective SRs Reflections on EDs – French Questionnaire.	147
6.12	Collective SRs of General Practitioners – French – Questionnaire.	159
6.13	Collective SRs of Knowledge of the Problem – French – Questionnaire.	151
6.14	Theoretical Construction of the Group Social Representations of the French Emergency Nurses about PCPs in EDs.	154
6.15	Collective SRs of Reflections of EDs and PCPs – Australia.	167
6.16	Collective SRs of General Practice Patients – Australian.	172
6.17	Collective SRs of the Role of the Emergency Departments – Australian.	175

6.18	Collective SRs of Abuse / Inappropriate use of Emergency Departments – Australia.	179
6.19	Theoretical Construction of the Group Social Representations of the French and Australian Nurses about PCPs in EDs.	181
7.1	Hypothesised Collective SRs of National Ideologies Towards National Health Care -Australian and French.	197
7.2	Hypothesised SRs of GPs Towards the Nature of ED Services.	198
7.3	Hypothesised SRs of Local Communities Towards ED Services.	199
7.4	Stakeholders of Primary Care Services in EDs.	200

GLOSSARY OF ACRONYMS

ED / EDs	Emergency Department(s). Departments specifically designated to receive unscheduled patients either for emergency care or consultations.
F.F.	French Franc. Unit of French monetary currency prior to the introduction of the Euro in 2002.
GP / GPs	General Practitioner(s). A medical practitioner who specialises in community medicine.
NSW	New South Wales.
NUM	Nurse Unit Manager.
PCP / PCPs	Primary Care Patient(s).
RTA	Road Traffic Authority.
SAMU	Service d'Aide Medicale Urgente. The French public ambulance service that operates from specified stations in the community. sometime the stations are located in hospital grounds, but they are independent of the hospital administration.
SMUR	Service Mobile d'Urgence et de Reanimation. Branches of the French public ambulance service that operate from hospital bases, more frequently out of EDs and staffed by the ED personnel.
SR / SRs	Social Representation (s). The individual's construction(s) of reality.