

**“They used to wear these white dresses...”: Nurse midwives’ experiences with change in South African health services**

Sarah C. Wilhelm

*Background:* Over the past fifty years, South Africa has seen the rise and fall of the apartheid system of racial segregation, as well as the rapid and devastating effects of the burgeoning HIV/AIDS epidemic on the health status of the population. South Africa’s health workers are situated at the crux of these changes and how they play out on the ground, in the clinics. Health workers whose careers have spanned these transitional years have experienced a multitude of changes personally, professionally, and in the workplace.

*Study Aim:* This research sought to investigate the experiences of Black South African nurse midwives through the social and political change that has occurred in South Africa over the course of their lives, including the end of apartheid and the rapid spread of HIV/AIDS.

*Methods:* In-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 14 nurse midwives working in prevention of mother to child transmission of HIV (PMTCT) for an NGO operating within government-run community health clinics in an urban township. A grounded theory approach was used in study design and analysis, allowing unanticipated results to emerge from participants’ responses to open-ended questions. Interviews were transcribed and coded for emerging themes.

*Results:* Themes centered around participants’ experiences with what they perceive to be an overall decline in the quality of public sector health services, particularly in relation to the quality and quantity of the health workforce. The introduction of free primary health care and its impact on health systems, changes in the role and status of nurse midwives, tensions between the public and private sectors, and a sense that South Africa’s political leadership was out of touch with the people emerged as key themes in relation to participants’ experiences with change over the course of their lives and careers.

*Discussion and Conclusions:* While the end of apartheid has allowed participants to advance in their careers, the impact of the change in government on the quality of health services and the status of the health workforce appears to have been more negative. Expanding educational and professional opportunities for black South Africans, coupled with an increasingly strained government health sector, may in fact be contributing to nurses leaving the public sector, as well as a general sense of diminishing respect and status associated with nurse midwifery. Participants’ contributions to a successful NGO-run PMTCT program suggest the importance of nurse leadership in providing HIV/AIDS related care in a complex social and political environment. Relevance to U.S. health workforce issues is discussed.

Thesis Committee:

Michelle Bell, PhD, MSW (Chair)

James Pfeiffer, PhD, MPH, MA

Lois Price Spratlen, PhD, FAAN

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