

TUESDAY 16 SEPTEMBER 1997

Debate

1407

This house believes that burnout in cancer nursing is a fallacy (debate session)

C. Krcmar, *Stuttgart, Germany*

The work of caring for critically, chronically, and terminally-ill cancer patients and their families must not – and this author believes does not – lead to burnout in nurses.

The goals of nursing are to identify the needs of patients in coping with the physical and psychosocial consequences of an illness and to implement measures to meet those needs. This intimate work with individuals is challenging and rewarding although at times certainly frustrating while our efforts focus on helping people.

Varying degrees of emotional exhaustion as well as feelings of depersonalisation and low personal achievement can be experienced by cancer nurses on any given day. Colleagues in other areas of nursing as well as persons employed in service industries are just as likely to experience these feelings. It is presumptuous, when not totally inaccurate, to use this fashionable term "burnout" when describing the art and practice of cancer nursing.

1408

This house believes that burn-out in cancer nursing is a fallacy

D. Voortman, J. Peters, Th. Wagener, *Nijmegen, the Netherlands, medical oncology unit, A52, The Netherlands*

Oncology nurses run a high risk of experiencing burn-out because of the close contact with patient and their families. Burn-out is a term used to describe a state of mental exhaustion. We can speak of three different aspects which together make up burn-out:

- (1) Emotional exhaustion
- (2) Distancing from patients
- (3) Negative self-evaluation of work performance

Research has shown that oncology differs from other medical specialisms with regard to the causes of work-related stress. While nurses working in other domains often experience stress or burn-out as a result of the work circumstances and the pressure of time. Those working on oncology units have more problems resulting from the contact with patients and colleagues and the frustration with medical policy. Oncology nurses must also deal with ethical dilemmas; repeated confrontation with limited curative possibilities is also an important source of stress. In addition, the participation of oncology nurses in carrying out scientific research can come in conflict with what is necessary for creating a high quality of life for patients. It is our opinion that burn-out is a fundamental problem that oncology nurses cannot avoid.