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INTENSIVE CARE DIARIES MAY REDUCE LATER SYMPTOMS OF POSTTRAUMATIC STRESS DISORDER

Jones C¹, Capuzzo M², Flaatten H³, Backman C⁴, Rylander C⁵, Griffiths R D⁶

¹ICU, Whiston Hospital, Prescot, UK, ²ICU, University Hospital, Ferrara, Italy, ³ICU, Haukeland University Hospital, Bergen, Norway, ⁴ICU, Vrinnevishuset, Norrköping, Sweden, ⁵ICU, Sahlgrenska University Hospital, Gothenburg, Sweden, ⁶School of Clinical Science, Liverpool University, UK

Aim

To assess the impact of receiving an ICU diary on symptoms of post traumatic stress disorder.

Introduction

Diaries, often with photographs, written by staff and the patient's family during the patient's stay in the intensive care unit (ICU) are becoming increasingly popular.

It was hoped that these diaries would help patients understand their illness better and fill gaps in their memory for ICU¹.

The impact of such diaries on longer term psychological recovery from critical illness has not been examined before.

During a multi-centre study comparing the psychological recovery of patients we took the opportunity to examine the possible impact of diaries.

Methods

Non randomised observational study of diary practice as part of a prospective study undertaken in 5 ICUs across 4 European countries examining the incidence of post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

In 3 study ICUs diaries were already in use and started if the staff had time. The ICU staff and relatives were both encouraged to contribute to the diary and photographs were taken.

After ICU discharge the patients recall for ICU was assessed using the ICU Memory Tool² which records factual, emotional and delusional memories, e.g. hallucinations, nightmares or paranoid delusions. Subsequently those patients with diaries had an interview with a nurse to introduce the diary.

Methods (continued)

At three months post ICU discharge the patients were assessed for the presence of PTSD-related symptoms using the short screening tool, the PTSS-14³.

Results

241 patients were recruited to the main study, of which 117 were at the three study centres doing diaries. Of the 117 patients, 42 received a diary (see table 1 for centre recruitment).

Table 1 Recruitment across diary centres

Centre	Patients completing follow-up	ICU diaries
Whiston	50	20 (42%)
Norrköping	31	14 (45%)
Bergen	27	7 (24%)

The level of PTSD-related symptoms at 3 months post ICU discharge was lower in those receiving a diary (Mann-Whitney U p = 0.04). (see fig 1)

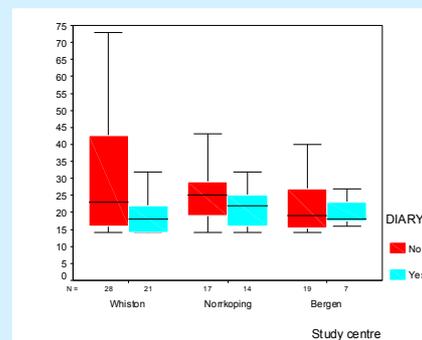


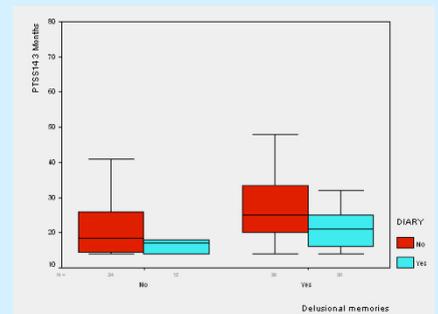
Figure 1 Lower PTSS-14 scores at 3 months by centre when receiving a diary

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When just those patients recalling delusional memories for ICU, e.g. nightmares, hallucinations, paranoid delusions, were examined, those receiving diaries had much lower levels of PTSD-related symptoms compared to those who did not (Mann-Whitney U, p = 0.028) (see figure 2).

Figure 2 Lower PTSS-14 scores for those with recall of delusional memories & receiving a diary



Conclusion

This study suggests that patients receiving an ICU diary have lower levels of PTSD-related symptoms.

The ICU diary may facilitate the working through of traumatic memories, particularly of delusions. This would appear to be acting like a natural cognitive behavioural therapy. The patient keeps reading through their diary to lessen the emotional impact and so the physiological arousal they feel when reminded of these memories.

There is a need to perform a randomised controlled trial of the impact of ICU diaries on psychological recovery.

References:

1. Bäckman C, Walter SM. *Intens Care Med.* 2001;27:426-429
2. Jones C et al. *Clin Intens Care.* 2000;11(5):251-255.
3. Twigg E et al. *Proceed Intens Care Soc* 2003:540P.