

Study examines how nurses view touch as a form of care

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Touching patients while providing care is an important and unavoidable aspect of the nursing profession. Nurses can also transform touch into a useful therapeutic tool to improve patients'— and their own—wellbeing.

That is the topic of a study, "'Permission to Touch': Nurses' Perspectives of Interpersonal Contact during Patient Care," published in the *Western Journal of Nursing Research*. The authors include two Washington State University College of Nursing faculty, Associate Professor Marian Wilson and Assistant Professor Tullamora Landis, former faculty member Michele Shaw, and lead author Enrico DeLuca, of Sapienza University of Rome, Italy, who visited WSU in 2018 to work with Wilson on the study.

Nurses touch patients frequently for tasks and to provide comfort and emotional support. Studies have looked at [physical contact](#) occurring during nursing care, offering several definitions. "Expressive" touch, for example, is spontaneous and used to establish contact, reassure or give comfort, such as laying a hand on a patient's shoulder.

Most previous studies have looked at the effect of such touch on patients; this study looks at how interpersonal contact is perceived by nurses. Nurses were also asked about their view of massage as a form of intentional touch in a clinical setting.

Through focus groups and interviews, participants said they found touch and massage helpful when providing [patient care](#) and saw them as especially important resources in providing emotional care.

Said one participant, "... there are also times when your patient needs extra emotional support and putting a hand on a shoulder, holding a hand, that can be really, really effective and that's something I use quite often."

Participants, however, also expressed concerns about boundaries and discussed how they assessed whether a patient was open to interpersonal touch.

The study noted that touch and massage techniques are useful tools that are already being employed by many nurses, but that it would be helpful to clarify the types of interpersonal contact used by nurses and possibly include [touch](#) as a competency in nursing education.

More information: Enrico De Luca et al, "Permission to Touch": Nurses' Perspectives of Interpersonal Contact during Patient Care, *Western Journal of Nursing Research* (2021). [DOI: 10.1177/01939459211000087](#)

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