

**PATIENT DIGNITY IN INTENSIVE CARE: CLINICAL IMPLICATIONS
OF QUALITATIVE FINDINGS FOR NURSING PRACTICE**
**DÔSTOJNOSŤ PACIENTA NA JEDNOTKE INTENZÍVNEJ STAROSTLIVOSTI:
VÝZNAM KVALITATÍVNYCH ZISTENÍ PRE OŠETROVATELSKÚ PRAX**

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ABSTRACT

Respect for patient dignity is one of the fundamental ethical principles of nursing care. In the intensive care units, it acquires particular importance due to patients' high level of dependence on nursing care and their often-limited ability to communicate. This Letter to the Editor builds upon our qualitative study focused on the support and violation of patient dignity in intensive nursing care, published in 2025 in the scientific journal *Zdravotnícke listy* (Ilievová & Králová, 2025). The motivation for this follow-up reflection stems from an ex-post recognition of the paradox associated with the tendency to take patient dignity for granted in the healthcare environment / in intensive care environments. The study highlights the importance of everyday interactions between the patient and the nurse, particularly the manner of communication, respectful behaviour, and the protection of privacy during care. The findings suggest that even simple and time-efficient communicative and behavioural practices may significantly influence patients' experience of dignity.

Keywords: Patient dignity. Intensive nursing care. Respectful nurse-patient communication. Humanization of intensive care.

ABSTRAKT

Rešpektovanie dôstojnosti pacienta patrí medzi základné etické princípy ošetrovateľskej starostlivosti. V prostredí jednotiek intenzívnej starostlivosti nadobúda osobitný význam vzhľadom na vysokú mieru závislosti pacientov od poskytovanej starostlivosti a obmedzené možnosti komunikácie. Týmto listom editorovi nadväzujeme na našu kvalitatívnu štúdiu zameranú na podporu a narušenie dôstojnosti pacientov v intenzívnej ošetrovateľskej starostlivosti publikovanú v roku 2025 v časopise *Zdravotnícke listy* (Ilievová & Králová, 2025). Dôvodom motivácie k spracovaniu dodatku k štúdiu je ex post uvedený paradox širšieho dopadu vnímania dôstojnosti pacienta ako samozrejmosti v zdravotníckom prostredí. Štúdia poukazuje na význam každodenných interakcií medzi pacientom a sestrou, najmä na spôsob komunikácie, rešpektujúce správanie a ochranu intimity počas poskytovania starostlivosti. Zistenia naznačujú, že aj jednoduché, časovo nenáročné komunikačné a behaviorálne postupy môžu významne ovplyvňovať pacientovo prežívanie dôstojnosti.

Kľúčové slová: Dôstojnosť pacienta. Intenzívna ošetrovateľská starostlivosť. Rešpektujúca komunikácia sestry s pacientom. Humanizácia intenzívnej starostlivosti.

Within intensive care units, patients frequently experience situations of profound dependence on nursing care, while their ability to communicate

may be limited by their clinical condition or therapeutic interventions. Routine nursing procedures therefore create contexts of heightened dependence on the sensitive and respectful approach of nurses. It is precisely in these situations that respect for patient dignity constitutes a concrete professional responsibility of nursing staff. This issue is particularly significant when patients cannot communicate effectively or express their needs due to their health status or treatment.

In this Letter to the Editor, we build upon our qualitative study focusing on the support and violation of patient dignity in intensive nursing care, published in 2025 in *Zdravotnícke listy* (Ilievová et al., 2025), and highlight the clinical implications of its findings for everyday practice in intensive care settings.

A key finding concerns the way patients perceive nurses' behaviour and communication in routine bedside situations. Being addressed respectfully by name, a calm tone of voice, clear explanations of procedures, and genuine interest in the patient's experience strengthen feelings of safety, recognition, and trust. Conversely, arrogant behaviour, indifference, raised voice, or disregard for patients' needs give rise to experiences of humiliation, inferiority, and vulnerability. Hygiene care and situations of complete dependence on nursing assistance were identified as the most sensitive moments affecting dignity. Daily interactions between patients and nurses – particularly modes of communication and delivery of care – substantially shape patients' perception of dignity, extending beyond the technical aspects or complexity of care provided. The findings underscore the importance and justification of a mindful and consistent communicative approach by nurses during specific bedside interactions as a means of humanising intensive care.

Our findings correspond with international research studies analysing the phenomenon of patient dignity in intensive care. These observations may be

interpreted within the framework of the dignity-conserving care model proposed by Chochinov (2002) and the concept of humanisation of intensive care (Papathanassoglou et al., 2012). This interpretative framework is also consistent with professional nursing standards, which emphasise the nurse's duty to safeguard patient dignity, including in situations where patients are dependent and unable to participate actively in decision-making (International Council of Nurses, 2021).

In everyday nursing practice, the protection and respect of patient dignity are most visibly manifested in communication with the patient (Happ et al., 2011). Respectful verbal and non-verbal communication and appropriate forms of address provide patients with a sense of recognition and worth. This perception is further reinforced by an empathetic tone of voice, active listening, and the protection of privacy (Olsen et al., 2009). By contrast, routinised communication and reduced sensitivity in patient contact may gradually weaken patients' perception of their own dignity.

These daily micro-interactions are simultaneously influenced and conditioned by time pressure and working conditions within intensive care, which may increase the risk of insensitive routine practices and nurses' moral distress (McAndrew et al., 2018; Epstein et al., 2009). The findings highlight the importance of consistently addressing patients by name, explaining procedures even in cases of impaired consciousness, safeguarding privacy during hygiene care, and adopting a unified communicative approach among nurses. Importantly, these measures are not time-consuming and are feasible even under conditions of high workload. Supporting patient dignity is therefore understood as an integral component of safe and high-quality care rather than as an additional or optional activity.

In intensive care, patient dignity is affected by nurses' everyday conduct. It represents a concrete element of nursing care enacted through communi-

cation and a respectful approach to the patient. However, the findings of our research point to a paradox between the formal institutionalization of the concept of dignity in ethical and legal frameworks and the actual absence of respect for human dignity in practice. We regard such a mindful approach – recognizing the patient as a human being endowed with inherent and inalienable dignity – as a natural and essential component of daily practice in intensive care units.

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