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Gender, Power and Practices in Tension:
Mixed-sex Rooming in Hospital

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Abstract

Using a feminist poststructural framework this study analyses interview reports and the complex contextual elements existing in the uncommon event of sharing one's bedroom space with a stranger of the opposite sex whilst in hospital. Dilemmas of gender sensibility, patients' rights and privacy are evident for the eight women interviewed for this study who experienced mixed-sex rooming (MSR) in New Zealand hospitals. Sex differentiation and gender difference significantly influence the conditions upon which social relationships evolve. This research examines the significance of the category 'woman' and the impact of gender and patient norms, including the foundations on which any objection to MSR might rest. Deconstruction revealed tensions around spatial confines and the operation of institutional power and authority at macro and micro levels. Conflicts between, the rhetoric of health reform, and the practices affecting patients' right to choose, and privacy, are discussed in the wake of the New Zealand health services restructuring of the 1990s and the re-organisation of patient accommodation, marked by mixing the sexes, thereby raising the question of whether gender is rendered somehow irrelevant.

It is concluded that particular interests are served by MSR and that patient concerns risk being neglected where choice is withheld. The exertion of institutional power was found to override some patients' choice. Patient acceptance of the practice is conditional in respect to preservation of their privacy, especially in regard to toileting and washing. Assumptions about gender persist even though mixing the sexes would appear to relegate gender to a neutral state. Recourse to blanket policies is found to be inappropriate when it is individual patients' rights that health professionals are bound to respect.

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