

## **Abstract**

**Background** : Advances in medical technology have led to increasing numbers of people undergoing heart surgery with decreasing hospital stay and decreasing mortality (Leske & Pelczynski, 1999). With patients being discharged home quicker and sicker than in the past, the immediate post discharge period is of concern to family carers (Theobald & McMurray, 2004). Much of the literature in this area, in fact, refers to Myocardial Infarction (Stewart, et al., 2001; Kristofferson, et al., 2007), with very little attention being paid to carers of cardiac surgery patients (Davies, 2000). In order to fill in this gap, it is important to understand the experience of carers of cardiac surgery patients following cardiac surgery after discharge.

**Aim** : The aim of this study was to explore the experience of carers of cardiac surgery patients following hospital discharge.

**Methods** : This study was conducted within the qualitative research paradigm using a phenomenological approach (Cohen, 1987). Purposive sampling was used and ten participants volunteered to join the study. Three weekly diaries and two semi-structured interviews [at 6 and 12 weeks] were used to collect the data. The Colazzi (1978) method will be used to guide the data analysis.

**Findings:** The findings revealed that the carers considered the experience of caring for their relatives to be a journey. This consisted of three phases, which were 'walking in the dark', where carers adopted a role for which they were not prepared; 'getting on with it' where carers were more in control; 'looking forward to the future' when life was back to normal. However, each participant's journey was an individual experience and the changes they presented in the phases, seemed generic. There were three overarching themes: 'the changing nature of relationships', 'reassurance' and 'being there' these showed how they felt about their relatives, the help they needed and the reason why they cared. These themes were not evident episodically but rather continuously for all the participants. The essence of the journey was interpreted as a process of transformation and return in which carers moved from being a person to a carer to back to a person.

**Conclusions:** The results of this research revealed that carers lived a journey when looking after cardiac surgery patients. The essence of it was a process of transformation and return when carers moved from being a person to a carer and back to a person. It is essential for health care professionals to review discharge planning for these short term lay carers by being aware of their experiences to help prepare them to adopt their caring role.