“A post-transplant person”: Narratives of heart or lung transplantation and ‘intensive care unit (ICU) delirium’

Intensive Care Unit (ICU) delirium is when people experience transitory hallucinations, delusions or paranoia in the ICU and little is known about how this experience affects individuals who have had a heart or a lung transplant. 11 participants were recruited from two UK heart and lung transplant services and were invited to ‘tell their story’ of having a transplant and experiencing ICU delirium. Narrative analysis was used and it was found that participants’ stories contained several shared plots as well as diversities. These findings were represented as a ‘shared story’ with four chapters. Chapter one of this shared story depicts individual’s stories before the transplant; ‘life’ fades into the background due to deteriorating chronic illness and ‘death’ becomes prominent as it is presented as the only alternative to a transplant; “You live all the time with Mr Death on your shoulder”. Death permeates all aspects of participants’ dream worlds in chapter two, as it emerges that dreams in intensive care “tunes into the subconscious of your fears”. In chapter three ‘death’ fades into the background as the climax of the shared story is reached and people believe that their health is restored, however reality steadily creeps in and people mourn what could have been; “I thought it was going to be like a miracle cure”. As the shared story draws to a close in chapter four, society’s preferred illness narrative of restitution is found to be insufficient, however the shared story diverges as individuals differ in the extent to which they can acknowledge and accept death and achieve resolution in their stories. Individuals describe how their experiences have impacted on their sense of self and identity; “a post-transplant person”. The clinical and service implications of these findings are discussed.