Abstract: The establishment of effective relationships is fundamental to good nursing practice and the fulfillment of nurses’ moral responsibilities. While intrapartum (labour and delivery) nurses are uniquely placed to establish relationships that can directly influence the woman’s experience of childbirth, there has been limited investigation of the relationships, identities and values that underlie nurses’ varied approaches and responses to labouring women. In this seminar, I will discuss my doctoral research, in which Margaret Urban Walker’s “expressive-collaborative” model of morality, which highlights the connection between our social and moral worlds, was used to illuminate the complexity of the moral responsibilities within everyday intrapartum nursing practice.

The findings of this study suggested that nurses enact their moral responsibilities to women in childbirth in a variety of ways depending on their personal history and professional experience, the circumstances, the people involved and the context of care. A key factor influencing the recognition and response to labouring women was the degree to which understandings and expectations related to birth were deemed to be reasonable and mutually agreed upon among and between nurses, other care providers, and women and their families.

While nurses were able to identify contextual influences that constrained their ability to maintain effective relationships with women, the influence of their own values and beliefs on the care they provided was less apparent. This suggests a need to challenge normative assumptions related to care of women in childbirth, including the provision of family centred care, choice and informed decision making, in order to create environments that can support and sustain practices that build understanding, mutuality and trust between intrapartum nurses and birthing woman. In addition, given the contested nature of childbirth and the lack of shared understandings of what constitutes ‘best’ care, there is a need to develop collaborative models of inter-professional maternity care that include the voices of women as a central component.