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# What matters most to adults with a tracheostomy in ICU and the implications for clinical practice: a qualitative systematic review and metasynthesis

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# Title Page

## What matters most to adults with a tracheostomy in ICU and the implications for clinical practice: a qualitative systematic review and metasynthesis

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# 1 What matters most to adults with a 2 tracheostomy in ICU and the implications 3 for clinical practice: a qualitative 4 systematic review and metasynthesis

5 'I see you': whole-person care is of paramount importance to adults in ICU with a tracheostomy

## 6 Abstract

7 **Purpose:** Tracheostomy is a common surgical procedure in ICU. Whilst often life-saving, it can have  
8 important impacts on patients. Much of the literature on tracheostomy focuses on timing and  
9 technique of insertion, risk factors and complications. More knowledge of patient experience of  
10 tracheostomy in ICU is needed to support person-centred care.

11 **Materials and Methods:** Qualitative systematic review and metasynthesis of the literature on adult  
12 experience of tracheostomy in ICU. Comprehensive search of four bibliographic databases and grey  
13 literature. Title and abstract screening and full text eligibility was completed independently by two  
14 reviewers. Metasynthesis was achieved using thematic synthesis, supported by a conceptual  
15 framework of humanised care.

16 **Results:** 2971 search returns were screened on title and abstract and 127 full texts assessed for  
17 eligibility. Thirteen articles were included for analysis. Five descriptive and three analytical themes  
18 were revealed. The over-arching theme was 'To be seen and heard as a whole person'. Patients  
19 wanted to be treated as a human, and having a voice made this easier.

20 **Conclusions:** Voice restoration should be given high priority in the management of adults with a  
21 tracheostomy in ICU. Staff training should focus on both technical skills and compassionate care to  
22 improve person-centred outcomes.

23  
24 **Keywords:** tracheostomy, voice, qualitative, systematic review, metasynthesis, humanisation

# 1 Introduction

2 Tracheostomy is a common procedure in intensive care units (ICU) and head and neck cancer, with  
3 an estimated 12 000 to 15 000 insertions per year in the UK prior to the COVID-19 pandemic (1, 2),  
4 The pandemic has seen figures much higher than this due to the dramatic increase in patients  
5 requiring mechanical ventilation and higher rates of tracheostomy in patients with COVID-19 (3, 4).  
6 Whilst tracheostomy is often a life-saving procedure, negative impacts on patients occur and include  
7 fear and anxiety; temporary or persistent inability to talk; difficulty swallowing; pain due to the tube  
8 or stitches; increased work of breathing; and trauma to the trachea which can lead to tracheal  
9 stenosis (3-9). Management decisions and clinical practices such as choice of type and size of  
10 tracheostomy tube (TT), cuff deflation, tracheal suction technique, facilitation of communication and  
11 assessment of pain, may influence the experience of these (5-8, 10). COVID-19 has presented  
12 additional challenges including higher incidence of upper airway swelling, infection exposure risk to  
13 staff, and the impact of restricted family visiting and staff use of personal protective equipment on  
14 patients (3, 13).

15  
16 Various initiatives have sought to improve the care of people with a tracheostomy over the past ten  
17 years (1, 14, 15). It is now widely accepted that high quality healthcare must be patient-centred and  
18 that this requires understanding of patient experience and perspectives (16-19). However, much of  
19 the evidence guiding tracheostomy management focuses on incidence, timing and technique of  
20 insertion, risk factors and associated complications. A number of quantitative, measurement-  
21 focused studies have addressed quality of life (QOL) and mental health outcomes in patients with a  
22 tracheostomy (20-22). While these studies capture prevalence and patterns of symptoms, they are  
23 not designed to present accounts of patient experience, which can help to shape future care.

24  
25 Qualitative methods have been used to provide insights into ICU patient experience of delirium (23)  
26 and mechanical ventilation (24-26). Nakarada et al's (27) mixed-methods systematic review  
27 described challenges facing patients with a tracheostomy and their caregivers such as poor basic

1 care, speech and communication difficulties, altered body image and reduced social interaction in  
2 the community. However, their review was not ICU specific. Tolotti et al's (2022) (28) qualitative  
3 scoping review addressed nurse-patient communication experiences in patients with a tracheostomy  
4 and/or on mechanical ventilation, and Whitmore et al's (2020) (29) mixed-methods scoping review  
5 of post-insertion ICU tracheostomy management concluded that more research was needed into  
6 patient experience of events relating to or impacted by tracheostomy. Further robust evidence and  
7 conceptual understanding of the global experience and priorities of ICU patients with a  
8 tracheostomy could help improve clinical care and patient-centred outcomes for this group of  
9 people..

10

11 The aim of this qualitative systematic review and metasynthesis was to describe what matters most  
12 to patients with a tracheostomy in ICU, and to consider the implications for clinical practice.

## 13 [Materials and methods](#)

14 Our qualitative approach to enquiry allowed exploration of behaviours and perspectives that would  
15 be unachievable through quantitative research. Our inductive methods encouraged the emergence  
16 of descriptive themes from the data rather than reviewers prior knowledge and beliefs (30). We  
17 included a metasynthesis to go beyond an aggregative synthesis of primary studies and develop new  
18 concepts and insights (31-33). Thematic synthesis as described by Thomas and Harden (2008) (33)  
19 allowed us to synthesise multiple datasets whilst retaining individual participant voices. The study  
20 protocol was registered prior to data collection with PROSPERO (reg. 227554).

21

## 22 [Search strategy](#)

23 Our systematic searches were aided by an expert librarian and included four major bibliographic  
24 health databases (Medline, Embase CINAHL and Web of Science). A 'tracheostomy' search construct  
25 was developed using alternative spellings, key words and medical subject headings. This was  
26 combined with a 'patient perspective' construct, consisting of phrases such as 'patient report',  
27 'patient opinion' and 'lived experience'. The search was first conducted and refined in OvidSP

1 Medline (see supplementary material A for full search strategy), then translated in other databases.  
2 We also completed grey literature, citation and journal searches and asked expert ICU clinicians for  
3 references of articles on patient experience of tracheostomy in ICU. Searches took place between 23  
4 December 2020 and 18 January 2021. Further re-runs of bibliographic database searches were  
5 completed on 29 June 2021 and May 2022.

6

### 7 [Study selection and data extraction](#)

8 Included articles were written in English and reported qualitative data from the perspective of adults  
9 in ICU with a tracheostomy or their non-professional carers (see supplementary material B for  
10 inclusion criteria). No date limits were applied. All articles were uploaded to EPPI-Reviewer software  
11 for systematic reviews (34), and each was independently screened on title and abstract by the first  
12 author (HN) plus one other reviewer (GC, SW, or CS). Disagreements were resolved by referring to a  
13 third reviewer (NP). The same process was followed in full-text screening. We piloted a data  
14 extraction tool to capture study characteristics (see supplementary material B). No modifications  
15 were necessary. All text from 'Results'/'Findings' onward was treated as data for analysis.

16

### 17 [Data synthesis strategy](#)

18 We followed Thomas and Harden's (2008) (33) thematic synthesis as follows:

- 19 1. Line-by-line inductive coding of text; development of new codes and translation between  
20 texts as each set of findings from studies were coded
- 21 2. Descriptive themes were developed by identifying similarities and differences between the  
22 initial codes, then grouped into hierarchical structures
- 23 3. The synthesis of selected findings was reviewed and newly developed descriptive themes  
24 applied to the review question to develop the analytical themes and metasynthesis from  
25 across the dataset, moving the synthesis beyond a collection of reported themes and  
26 drawing out collective inferences

27

1 During the third stage, a conceptual framework relevant to the preliminary review findings was  
2 identified (35) and used as a lens through which to view and shape emerging analytical themes,  
3 translate findings into clinical implications and provide a deeper level of analysis.

#### 4 5 Reflexivity and rigor

6 We followed the ENTREQ checklist (36) to ensure transparency of reporting (see supplementary  
7 material C). Search results and study selection have been presented using the PRISMA flowchart. To  
8 enhance dependability and credibility, two reviewers undertook these stages independently, coming  
9 together to review codes and themes and discuss potential new analytical themes, repeating this in  
10 an iterative cycle (37).

11 Our research team included researchers with extensive experience in qualitative methods. Feedback  
12 on descriptive and analytical themes from the wider study team and patient and public involvement  
13 (PPI) group was incorporated into the findings. The PPI group was convened to support the first  
14 author's PhD project. PPI members had all experienced tracheostomy on ICU and had either  
15 responded to a request for support via ICUSteps, been a patient of the first author or were recruited  
16 via word of mouth. Together, the measures described above enhanced Lincoln and Guba's  
17 (1985)(38) concept of trustworthiness, credibility, confirmability, and transferability. The lead  
18 author/researcher was motivated by clinical experience as a Speech and Language Therapist in ICU.

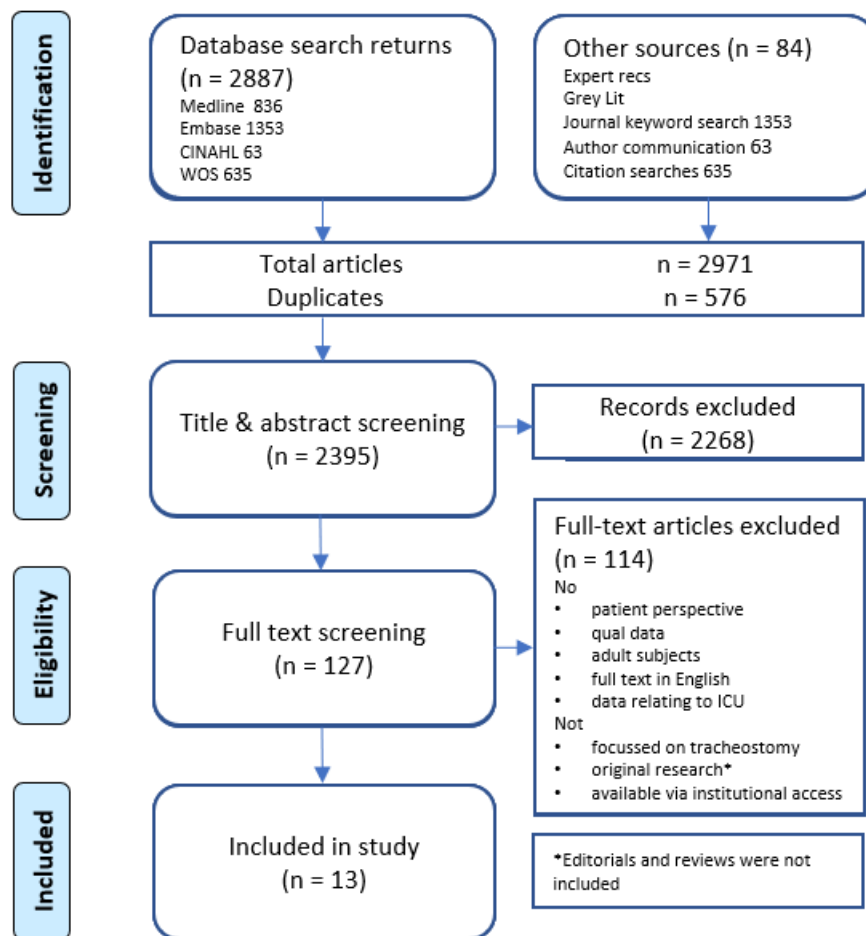
## 19 Results

### 20 Study selection

21 The search returned 2971 records. Following de-duplication, 2395 articles were screened on title  
22 and abstract. Full text screening was conducted on 127 articles. Thirteen articles were included in  
23 the review and metasynthesis (see Figure 1.). The main reasons for exclusions were insufficient focus  
24 on tracheostomy (for example, mentioned only as an outcome) or no qualitative data. One article  
25 was excluded due to difficulty distinguishing between data relating to intubated or tracheostomised  
26 patients (39).

27

1 Figure 1. PRISMA flow diagram of search results and article selection process



2  
3

#### 4 Study characteristics

5 This metasynthesis covers data published between 2003 and 2019 from 203 participants across 7  
6 countries (see supplementary material D). Sample sizes ranged from to 3 to 81. Sample breakdown  
7 by age, sex and ethnicity was not provided by all authors. Data was collected via interview in 12 of  
8 the 13 studies. Research questions related to the lived experience of tracheostomy (n = 8) or  
9 mechanical ventilation (n = 4) and eating and drinking (n = 1) in patients with a tracheostomy.

10

#### 11 Risk of bias assessment

12 Quality assessment of selected articles was completed using the Critical Appraisal Skills Programme  
13 (CASP) checklist for qualitative research (40) (see supplementary material E). Following the example  
14 of Lachal et al (2017) (41), a relevance weighting of one to three points was added depending on  
15 how closely studies met the criterion of reporting on patient experience of tracheostomy in ICU (all



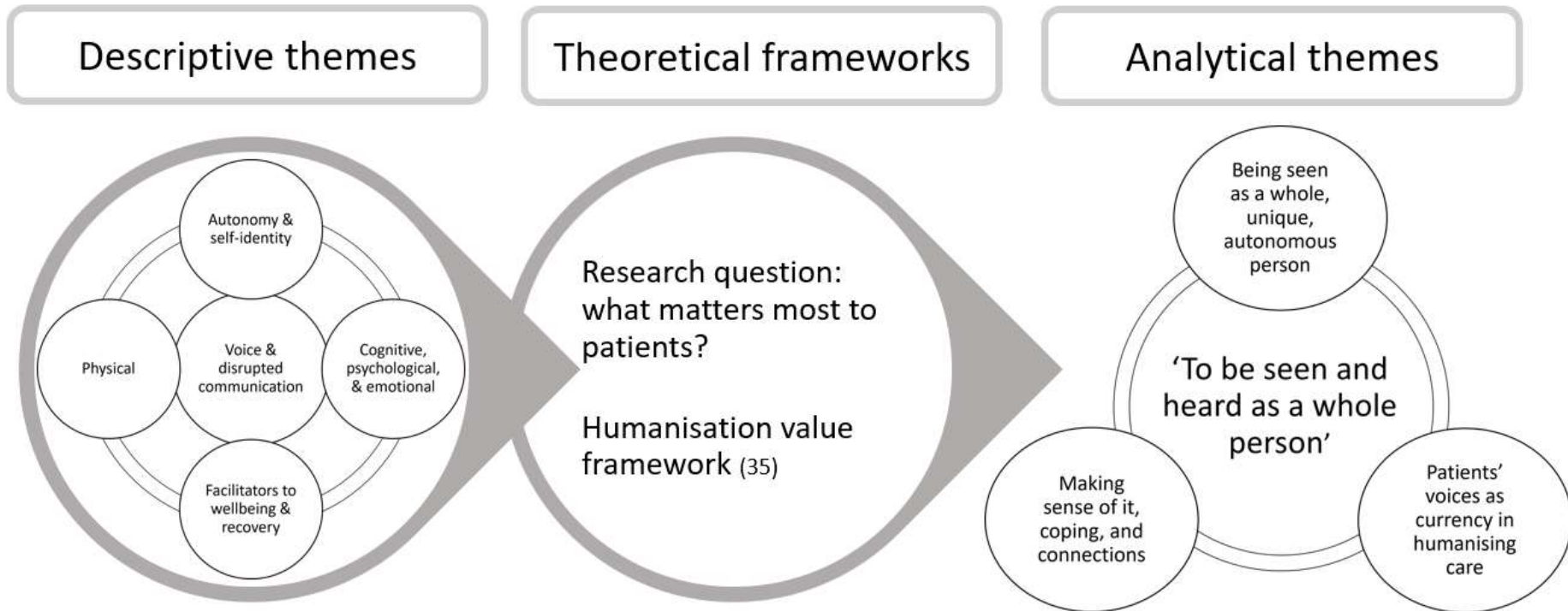
1 studies included some data on this). No articles were excluded, however, a sensitivity analysis  
2 reviewed the impact of including studies with lower CASP or relevance scores (see supplementary  
3 material F). Weighted scores ranged from 13-18 (out of 20). One study had only three participants  
4 and was completed by a single author, limiting credibility of findings (42). The balance of participant  
5 quotes to author interpretation and provision of contextual information varied across studies,  
6 impacting credibility and transferability of findings. There were nuanced differences between studies  
7 based in long-term settings versus acute settings in terms of patients' experience of anger due to  
8 communication difficulties and issues of autonomy and self-identity.

9

### 10 [Descriptive Themes](#)

11 The five major Descriptive Themes (DTs), developed from participant quotes and study author  
12 interpretations from the 13 selected studies, are presented with illustrative quotes in Table 1 below.  
13 Figure 2 shows the analytical process post initial coding, including thematic maps of high-level  
14 descriptive and analytical themes.

1 Figure 2. The analytical process and thematic maps of high-level descriptive and analytical themes – table 1 provides detail of each descriptive sub-theme



2

3

Table 1. Descriptive themes, sub-themes, and illustrative quotes

Themes	Sub-themes	Facets of theme	Studies	Illustrative quotes (direct participant quotes in italics)
Voice and disrupted communication	How it feels to be voiceless in ICU	Profoundly negative experience and leads to frustration, fear, anger, uncertainty, withdrawal	(42-53)	<i>Yes, it was a really overwhelming feeling when I couldn't make myself be understood, that they didn't understand me, and that I couldn't tell them anything. That, that was just so distressing.. it was simply my temper that came, when I realized, I couldn't manage it. p2298 (48)</i>
		Being misunderstood/people mis-guessing is infuriating	(42, 45,49, 53)	<i>They often just put words in my mouth, that would have nothing to do with what I was saying and that was really annoying. I remember I would just shake my head really strongly and mouth 'no!' p13 (49)</i>
		Being able to speak again brings great relief	(42, 49, 50, 52)	
	AAC is a poor substitute for speech	Mouthing, head nod/shake, banging on table, throwing things, gestures, writing	(42, 44-49, 53)	<i>I wanted to talk but I couldn't...my friends said try to write...but I was too weak to write and not sufficiently conscious to write a whole sentence...I couldn't do anything p27 (53)</i>
		AAC can allow basic messages but is slow, effortful, and often unsuccessful AAC is dependent on good limb strength, cognition, and skills/patience of listener	(42, 45-49, 51-53)	Paula explained that the content of her communication was simplified due to loss of voice <i>'Of course if you could talk it would be different. I was still reading off using the letters. I couldn't do long sentences but could answer basic needs or basic things I wanted to say' p13 (49)</i>  <i>It got very frustrating. Especially when I wanted people to lip read what I was saying and they couldn't understand me. P505 (52)</i>
		Lip reading preferred method of communication after voice by patients	(45, 53)	
	Speech functions: implications of impaired communication	Having their voice is of fundamental importance to patients	(42, 44-41, 49, 51, 53)	Interpretation/metaphorical: Communication or least the ability to speak is a fundamental need for most people; for Brian the stress of not being able to speak <i>'drove me nuts'.</i> P1121 (46)
		Speech allows interpersonal exchanges	(42, 44-46, 48, 49, 51, 53)	Several participants described how they were screaming inside because of pain, but were unable to communicate their pain to healthcare professionals. One participant described this sentiment well: <i>Then it hurt so much I almost screamed my head off. Well, inwardly. But I didn't get out a damn thing. It really hurt. So, it sucks when you can't say anything.</i> p2299 (48)
		It is difficult for patients who cannot talk to ask for information and flag needs	(42, 44, 45, 47, 49, 51)	The inability to speak made it difficult to interact with other people, and this generated in patients a sense of isolation linked to a feeling of 'counting for nothing' (i.e., worthlessness). <i>"... I felt as if I counted for nothing... I could not say anything... I couldn't interact..."</i> p28 (53)
		It is difficult to express personality and correct misassumptions without speech	(42, 43, 45, 47, 51, 53)	
Speech helps form and maintain relationships		(44, 45, 50, 51)		

Themes	Sub-themes	Facets of theme	Studies	Illustrative quotes (direct participant quotes in italics)
Autonomy and self-identity	Agency and self-determination	Impaired communication prevents patient participation in decisions	(42, 44, 45, 47, 49, 51, 53, 54)	<p>Patients reported that they felt invisible in relation to the inability to communicate with others and not being involved in the care plan, as if they did not exist. Some patients felt uneasy when the physicians did not speak directly to them as if the absence of their voice blocked any form of communication, including information. <i>"...the doctors...never spoke to me. Until recently, they just didn't speak to me...now if I ask a question they give me an answer. All was well with the nurses, I didn't have any problems."</i> p28 (53)</p> <p>[on return of voice] I could say 'no, that I didn't want to be in this position', 'no, I didn't want that pillow behind my back', 'no, I didn't particularly want another nasogastric tube', things like that. p14 (49)</p> <p><i>If it wasn't important, I wouldn't repeat it. If it was something important enough that it was bothering me or aches or pains, I would repeat it over and over and over until they got the message... And I'd keep persisting and persisting if it was important enough. If it wasn't important, I'd just forget it. p1171 (45)</i></p> <p><i>...very often they didn't understand me...they thought I had a tic or a problem with my head instead I was trying to tell them that something was hurting me there... in the end I gave up p27 (53)</i></p>
		Awareness of dependency on others leads to sense of loss of control and powerlessness	(42-48, 51-53)	
		Opposing priorities of patients and care teams may lead to focus on physical safety over independence	(44, 48)	
		Self-determination as 'having control' and/or a mental attitude	(43, 41, 54)	
		Perseverance in communicating a message vs giving up/withdrawal affected by the perceived importance of message or sense of futility	(42, 45, 48, 49, 53)	
		Families as key patient advocates and motivators	(43, 53)	
	The self and connecting with others	Feeling incomplete without a voice	(42, 44-46)	<p>Participants understood the concern for their safety, yet as those concerns prevailed, they spoke of a changing sense of freedom, independence, and a self that was, once again in jeopardy: <i>"I was feeling caged, being very smothered and stifled, and that I was losing my own sense of who I am and that, you know. And it was making me hurt inside"</i> p61 (44)</p> <p><i>I had expected to feel better. But it was just the opposite. I was laid down, now and then washed and combed. At six in the morning someone came and just started...did all sorts of things that I didn't want. p1106 (51)</i></p> <p><i>Some care assistants are more concerned about the ventilator than me p334 (47)</i></p> <p>Participants wanted to connect with others, and to do so, they found various voiceless ways to fill the void left from the impaired communication process. Participants attempted to express themselves in physical ways, often using a variety of communication means, even though this was arduous for them. p1170 (45)</p>
		Risk of dehumanisation and focus on physical needs in absence of voice	(42, 44, 47, 51)	
		Importance of relationships with others to mitigate isolation	(44, 45, 48, 53)	
		Families act as intermediaries between patients and staff	(43, 53)	
		Praise for staff when patients felt well-looked after both physically and emotionally	(42, 43, 45, 46, 48, 50, 51, 53)	
		Staff speak to patients more when patients can speak	(53)	

Themes	Sub-themes	Facets of theme	Studies	Illustrative quotes (direct participant quotes in italics)
Cognitive, psychological, and emotional needs and experiences	Fear, anxiety and mental wellbeing	Being on ICU with a TT is a frightening experience	(42-54)	<i>The final distinct negative theme was fear and anxiety (3 responses, 6%). They described tracheostomy experiences as “mentally difficult and anxious”, “scared” and “frightening”. p15 (50)</i>
		Sources of fear: fear of death; difficulty breathing; TT blockage or dislodgment; not being able to talk; choking/aspirating; uncontrolled pain; the unknown; TT changes	(47, 48, 50, 52)	<i>I was shaking... Interviewer: What did they do to relax you? Oh nothing they just calmed me down a bit they just said relax, its nothing major, or anything...its gonna be quick [tracheostomy tube change] p1119 (46)</i>
		Patients often experience shock of waking on ICU with a TT, preparation and information can help mitigate this	(43, 44, 48, 49, 51, 54)	<i>The shock of waking up, not knowing what had happened and being unable to speak, evoked feelings of frustration and despair. Some did not understand that they could not speak; thus, they tried to talk louder and louder and became increasingly stressed out p2299 (48)</i>
		Voicelessness and insufficient information make patients feel vulnerable, helpless and unable to cope  Anxiety can be lessened by: Tailored information; Caring attitudes of staff; Presence of family; Return of speech	(42, 43, 45, 46, 48, 50, 52)	
	Information needs and situational awareness	Patients who understand their situation recognise ICU treatment and TT mean difference between life and death	(42, 44, 50-52)	<i>Despite the frustrations and discomfort that all the participants described, all of them appeared to understand the need for a tracheostomy. They emphasized that they had no choice. They viewed the tracheostomy as a means of survival p505 (52)</i>
		This may help acceptance of restrictive ICU treatments such as TT but also engender fear, e.g. of TT blockage or dislodgement and aspiration or choking	(42, 45, 46, 53, 54)	<i>All I'm worried about is coughing this thing out, (indicates tracheostomy tube) which I nearly did!... p40 (42)</i>
		Voiceless patients are offered less information and not always able to ask questions; some staff do not talk directly to voiceless patients	(49, 51, 53)	<i>[on regaining voice] I could communicate. I could tell people what I needed and ask questions about what was happening and people don't think you want to know why, so they would say this is what happened but afterwards you could ask why, I, well, I could ask questions. p14 (49)</i>
		Being well informed helps build sense of safety	(48, 52)	
		In the absence of information, patients struggle to make sense of what is happening and fear they will remain in ICU and/or voiceless forever	(45, 47, 48, 53)	<i>When I came out of the coma it took me a while to fully understand what was going on. Also because you are in a confused state, you forget where the buzzer is sometimes and (I) was also getting medication, which was given to me that also doped me up a little bit more. Even though I was conscious I was very confused and so the lack of speech makes it worse (Roger) p13 (49)</i>
		Confusion and memory impairment reduces patients' ability to make sense of the situation or retain information	(42, 47, 49)	

Themes	Sub-themes	Facets of theme	Studies	Illustrative quotes (direct participant quotes in italics)
	The experience of time	Being on ICU with a TT poses an existential challenge to some patients, who question what events mean for their life and them as a person: their identity, autonomy and where they will live after discharge	(44, 45, 54)	
		Time slows in ICU for patients with a TT	(44, 45, 54)	<i>A participant reflected on the time when she was voiceless and stated that time passed "very badly. Slowly. And to me, it would never end. Then I was starting to think— I said, 'Oh, my God. This [pointing to tracheostomy, indicating not having voice] could go on and on and on forever. p1170 (45)</i>
		Slowing of time is worse when patients are non-verbal or are afraid of never being able to talk again	(45)	
		Lack of routine or structure to the day slows time and causes boredom	(45, 52-54)	<i>In ICU there isn't really any routine or pattern, it's just twelve hours of blur. Whereas, with eating, it breaks this up and makes it more like your normal day. The routine helped as I had a set pattern and knew what to expect. It also really helped me in getting ready to be transferred to the ward. p149 (54)</i>
		Mealtimes can bring back routine and sense of normality and help pass the time	(54)	<i>'It's a life-altering transition for me, but a positive life-altering transition in that I can be me again right now. You know, I take this whole disease day to day. p62 (44)</i>
		Patients' experience changes over time as they make sense of and adapt to their new situation	(45, 48)	
		Good communication systems or voice can help adaptation	(45, 48)	
Physical needs and experiences	Physical sensations related to tracheostomy	Patients feel pain at the stoma site, from stitches, on dressing changes, tube changes, suctioning and due to large tubes	(42, 46, 50, 52)	<i>Ahhh! That's when you get a bit of pain, because around this bit (indicates the tracheostomy stoma)... is very tender.... You can feel it all the way around because when you cough, you're retching at the same time.. and then it is painful! p40 (42)</i>
		Swallowing feels different and many patients experience inability to eat or drink which is physically and psychologically challenging	(42, 44, 46, 50, 52, 54)	all the participants commented on difficulties with swallowing and some problems with eating and drinking <i>[Swallowing] was awkward too. Very difficult. It still is actually (Pt B) I was uncomfortable with it because every time you tried to swallow you could feel this lump there (Pt C) I couldn't eat properly and I found afterward when I started swallowing again... you could feel where the wound was and you feel as though your throat was bruised (Pt D) p504 (52)</i>
		Dry mouth, thirst and cravings can be intense	(52, 54)	
		Some patients experience choking episodes and are frightened of aspirating food and drink	(46, 54)	
		Difficulty breathing due to illness, suctioning, blocked TTs, choking or asynchrony with the ventilator is frightening	(42, 44, 46, 50, 52)	<i>I did want to grab hold of a pint of water and glug it down...it was a bit desperate wanting to have a drink. Food, not so much, but the drinking... 'ou're so thirsty' it's unbelievable" p504 (52)</i>
		Coughing and suctioning are tiring and painful. Pain on suction and can be linked to technique	(42, 50, 52)	

Themes	Sub-themes	Facets of theme	Studies	Illustrative quotes (direct participant quotes in italics)
	Meeting physical needs	Removal of secretions brings relief	(42)	
		Voiceless patients are not always able to make needs known which can lead to enduring pain, discomfort, fear and uncertainty over whether needs will be met	(43-45, 48, 49, 53)	Several participants described how they were screaming inside because of pain, but were unable to communicate their pain to healthcare professionals. One participant described this sentiment well: <i>Then it hurt so much I almost screamed my head off. Well, inwardly. But I didn't get out a damn thing. It really hurt. So, it sucks when you can't say anything</i> p2299 (48)
		Staff anticipation of needs improves as they get to know patients and communication improves	(45, 48, 53)	Participants described impaired communication causing their needs for toileting, pain medication, and suctioning to go unmet..(....). One woman's silent screams were not heard when her oxygen tank ran out. This resulted in extreme anxiety for her because she felt the constant need to ensure that her oxygen tank was full. p1172 (45)
		Coordinated and competent MDTs provide better, more consistent care	(43, 46, 47, 50, 52)	<i>...I must say that the nurses were really good and I will always say this, they were very professional... then we would also joke and laugh... look I say it from the bottom of my heart, because when they passed they said hello and asked how I was feeling and this was comforting for me... there were these people who really cared about me..."</i> (Agostino) p28 (53)
		Patients distinguish two equally important types of care: competent completion of tasks, and caring attitudes and behaviours of staff	(43, 45, 46, 48, 50, 51, 53)	
		Adjustment to breathing and stoma healing post decannulation is difficult for some patients but preparation and information can help	(42, 52)	
Facilitators to wellbeing and recovery	Improving communication	Having your own voice is the best means of communication	(42, 45, 49-53)	[on being told she would get her voice back] <i>I said "Oh, my God answered by prayer." I was so pleased, so happy. And then the first day I got my voice, it's like a grand opening, you know...and I can relate to [others] what went on during the day. Just instead of sitting there like a bump on a log.</i> p1169 (45)
		Speech gives patients a sense of freedom, control, ability to join in, request information and ask for things to be done	(45, 49, 51, 53)	Several of the participants also highlighted the importance of their relatives being familiar with their usual body language and gestures. This familiarity put them in a good position to understand and relay the participants' concerns to others p2300 (48)
		In the absence of voice, tailored communication strategies and extra time allow patients to signal basic needs and interact socially	(45, 48, 49, 52)	Nobody came...nobody was near me (surely they did come)...nobody...no, there wasn't anybody and then my desperation grew more and more...but probably they also didn't have the time... p28 (53)
		Knowing patients better aids communication	(45, 48)	
		Friends and family act as advocates and translators	(43, 48, 53)	
		Patients are sensitive to body language, eye contact, touch and staff presence at the bedside; this non-verbal communication can communicate a sense of calm, safety and interest in patients	(43, 45, 48, 50)	

Themes	Sub-themes	Facets of theme	Studies	Illustrative quotes (direct participant quotes in italics)
	Coping strategies and character traits	Patients use various coping strategies such as: Humour setting goals and monitoring progress trying to regain normality to daily lives (e.g. routine of mealtimes, religious activities) using sleep and watching TV as a means of escape	(43, 45, 48, 53, 54)	I think the best way is once you've had it done once and you know you've gotta have it done a second time is just to grin and bear it, really attack it mentally otherwise it'd just bloody drive you crazy I think p1119 (46)  The formulation of goals was recounted by some, often with removal from the technology as the primary goal. Dan illustrated this point: <i>'My number one goal was to get the tracheostomy out</i> p144 (54)
		Spiritual beliefs and having self-determination can give patients strength, help them cope and encourage recovery	(43, 54)	One participant described conversing with her deceased mother who told her, <i>"Baby, go back. It's not your time yet. God has something for you to do and you go back."</i> Another participant recalled an incident where her grandfather, whom she referred to as her <i>"guardian angel"</i> , appeared at the bedside. She believed that <i>"he was there to help"</i> her and insisted that he <i>"pulled"</i> her through this traumatic event. p332 (43)
	Signs that indicate recovery to patients	The removal of attachments is important to patients and signifies recovery	(45, 52, 54)	Bijal reported that getting rid of tubes was important for psychological and moral reasons. He expressed the need to <i>'start shedding attachments'</i> , which enabled him to <i>'start believing that the end is in sight'</i> . p144 (54)
		Return to normality is important (e.g., showering, using the toilet, taking communion, speaking with family and friends and going home)	(42, 43, 53, 54)	For many, commencing oral intake indicated that they were getting better. It was described as symbolizing the <i>'road to recovery'</i> . Fred expressed it as <i>"being very glad to have got to that stage, as it signified that things were moving in a positive way. Therefore, it was a step on the road to recovery, so I was delighted to have got there. It was terribly important."</i> It would appear that often it is less the need for food, than what eating signifies that is important. <i>"Eating is part of normal life, it wasn't like I was dying for a plate of fish and chips, but it represented a return to normality and that was so important."</i> p144 (54)
		Eating and drinking brings pleasure to patients and symbolises return to normality/end of deprivation of basic human needs, however, modified food/drink, absence of family, and the ICU environment can make mealtimes feel medicalised	(42, 54)	Charles explained that return of voice was positive but also a sign of recovery of general health status, <i>"It was pleasing to be able to speak again. Mainly you felt as though you were getting better, recovering from the worst of your illness"</i> . In agreement Rodger reported, <i>"In my opinion that slows your recovery down as you're frustrated and start to go into a shell and it adds to the confusion. In my opinion, talking helped me recover quicker. I'm no doctor but it made me feel a lot better, when you feel better you recover."</i> p14 (44)
		Regaining voice contributes to feeling of getting better	(49)	
	Making sense of the situation	Provision of adequate information can reassure patients and put them at ease, e.g., in preparation for elective admission, explaining reason for emergency admission, giving information on tracheostomy, and preparing for procedures (e.g., tracheostomy tube change)	(46-48, 50, 52, 53)	Some were satisfied and one HMV user stated: <i>Yes, I got the information about tracheotomy, we were well prepared</i> p333 (47)  <i>Was well looked after and talked through each part when needed</i> p13 (50)
		Ability to speak helps patients get the information they need	(49, 51)	<i>Living independently is like breathing to me. You can't do, go without it. You know it's like having your own self-determination and, uh, to feel you have purpose in life is key to most people, I would think, you know If you feel, a human being feels that they have no purpose, what is, why are we existing then?</i> p61 (44)



Themes	Sub-themes	Facets of theme	Studies	Illustrative quotes (direct participant quotes in italics)
		The ability to live at home and having autonomy is meaningful to patients with a long-term tracheostomy	(44, 47)	
	The essentialness of families and relationships with others	Families provide huge support to patients and act as translators and advocates for patients	(43, 47, 48, 50, 53, 54)	<p>The constant presence of family members and health care professionals provided solace, comfort, and reassurance during a time wrought with uncertainty, stress and fear. In addition to providing emotional support, vigilant family members in this study may have served as a communication conduit for information delivery and reinforcement, thus reducing anxiousness and ambiguity. p332 (43)</p> <p>Several participants mentioned the importance of having eye contact and physical contact: <i>When the anxiety comes, they were there straight away. They tried to calm you down, held your hand, and spoke to you. Communicated even though I didn't have a voice. And eye contact, that was very important for me then.</i> p2300 (48)</p> <p><i>...I really trusted them, the nurses don't know how good they are, ...they don't realize how important they are.... they treated me like a baby, they reassured me...</i> p29 (53)</p>
		Families are a source of comfort and motivation to recover	(43, 53)	
		Staff-patient relationships are important to patients. Eye contact, holding hands, touch, presence at the bedside, talking with patients and getting to know them alongside provision of information makes patients feel well looked after and reassured	(42, 43, 45, 46, 48, 50, 52, 53)	
		Trust and sense of safety depends on both competent care and caring attitudes of staff	(42, 43, 45-48, 50, 51, 53)	

\*AAC = Augmentative and Alternative Communication, for example., writing, alphabet charts, high-tech communication aids, TT = tracheostomy tube, ICU = Intensive Care Unit

## 1 Analytical Themes (ATs)

2 The analytical themes and inferred answers to the research question were derived through methods  
3 described above (33). Similar to “best fit” framework synthesis (55), we combined inductive and  
4 deductive methods in our review. In contrast to this method, we selected and chose to incorporate a  
5 conceptual model after developing and in response to the DTs from stage 2 of our thematic  
6 synthesis. We had noted human aspects of experience and care in the descriptive themes and sub-  
7 themes and used Todres et al’s (2009) (35) Humanisation Value Framework for healthcare to help  
8 shape a cohesive conceptual model of the experience of having a tracheostomy in ICU. Todres et al’s  
9 (2009) eight dimensions of humanisation are shown in Table 2 (see supplementary material G for a  
10 table showing DTs against eight dimensions of the Humanisation Value Framework). This step helped  
11 reveal the interplay between DTs and move from surface level findings to higher level themes and  
12 conceptual understanding of patient experience of tracheostomy in ICU. It also aided interpretation  
13 of implications for practice. Analytical themes were cross-checked with original texts and descriptive  
14 themes to ensure they captured and explained the core concepts identified. Implications for clinical  
15 practice were also identified.

16  
17 Table 2. the Eight Dimensions of the Humanisation Value Framework (Todres, 2009), reproduced  
18 under the creative commons licence

Forms of humanisation	Forms of dehumanisation
Insiderness	Objectification
Agency	Passivity
Uniqueness	Homogenisation
Togetherness	Isolation
Sense-making	Loss of meaning
Personal journey	Loss of personal journey
Sense of place	Dislocation
Embodiment	Reductionist body

19  
20 The three analytical themes identified are: ‘Being seen as a whole, unique, autonomous person’;  
21 ‘Making sense of it, coping, and connections’; and ‘Patients’ voices as a key currency in humanising  
22 care’ (see Figure 2.). These are described further below and presented in Table 3 with corresponding  
23 implications for practice. The overarching analytical theme is defined as ‘To be seen and heard as a  
24 whole person’. Patients wanted to be treated as a human, and having a voice made this easier.

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AT 1: Being seen as a whole, unique, autonomous person

The evidence suggests that it is greatly important to patients to be seen for who they are as a person, not just for their medical needs. In the studies reviewed, not being able to speak threatened this through changing interactions between patients and staff. It made patients feel invisible (53), not valued as a human being (45-47, 51, 53), or treated as ‘just a “body” on which people act’ (53).

*‘they talked as if I weren’t there at all. As if I were deaf, or not quite right in the head.. that sort of thing, a bad situation. It was degrading’* (direct participant quote) (51)

‘Common to all participants were the communication challenges that occurred while they were in ICU on the ventilator. Their compromised ability to communicate resulted in feelings of frustration, vulnerability, isolation, and a diminished sense of self’ (author quote) (44)

Perceptions of staff not making an effort to communicate with voiceless patients, not attempting to correct misunderstandings, or jumping to conclusions about a message (42, 43, 45, 46, 49, 51, 53), were deeply upsetting to patients, and can be seen as dehumanising . In contrast, Flinterud and Andershed’s (2015) (48) study highlighted the value of caring, attentive staff who acknowledged communication difficulties, took time to try to understand, were present at the bedside and communicated through verbal and non-verbal means. Patients wanted to have some control or influence over care and management decisions. This extended from immediate concerns, such as getting basic needs met (43-45, 48, 53), to longer term decisions around rehabilitation or discharge destination (44, 49). Family was seen to be hugely important to patients (43, 48, 50, 53). In the terms of humanisation, families afforded patients agency through interpreting communication more easily and acting as advocate for patient needs. Functional activities such as eating and drinking were seen to be important to patients for physical and psychological reasons and symbolised not only being human but also milestones in recovery (46, 50, 52, 54).

1 AT 2: Making sense of it and connections with others

2 The need to make sense of the situation was a strong theme across studies. Patients wanted to  
3 understand what had happened to them, their current situation, and what the future held (42-44,  
4 46-54). Reduced situational awareness due to lack of information, confusion and communication or  
5 memory impairment could lead to fear, anxiety, and loss of coping.

6 Connections and relationships with others were highlighted as important to patients and without  
7 them patients felt isolated (42-46, 48, 50, 51, 53). Caring staff-patient relationships were powerful in  
8 creating a sense of trust and safety. Connections were made verbally but also non-verbally, through  
9 eye contact, presence at the bedside, facial expressions, and touch (43, 45, 48, 53). In this review,  
10 connections meant more than simple transfer of information; they meant human contact.

11 'The importance of being well informed, in conjunction with eye and physical contact, was  
12 noted by several of the participants. This conveyed calmness and was very important in  
13 fostering a sense of security and safety in the participants. One participant emphasised this  
14 feeling:

15 *"But they spoke to me, all of them. I understood that, and it was just fantastic. But I recall that*  
16 *she [the nurse] was also very good at holding hands and using touch. And I found that very*  
17 *comforting so that's really important, you know."* (author/direct participant quote)

18 Processing and understanding ICU admission is important to patients (42, 44-50) as is building and  
19 maintaining relationships with those around them (42-44, 47, 48, 50, 53). 'Making sense of the  
20 situation' and 'connections' appear to be interdependent; as staff-patient relationships are  
21 established, staff convey more information and provide more social and emotional support (45, 48).  
22 Some studies highlighted the strength of support derived from relationships with family (43, 48, 50,  
23 53, 54).

1 AT 3: Patients' voices as a key currency in humanising care

2 Much of what mattered to patients depended on having a voice, both literal and metaphorical. For  
3 staff to see the patient as a whole person; understand their worldview; meet their physical,  
4 psychosocial, and emotional needs; and for patients to have a say in care, establishing  
5 communication was vital (42, 44-49, 51, 53). Patients communicated in a range of ways. Voice was  
6 valued over Alternative and Augmentative Communication (AAC), however, partly due to the  
7 efficiency of communication it afforded but also due to its contribution to patients' identities (42,  
8 45, 46, 48-53). Literal voice re-enforced patients' uniqueness as well as facilitating agency.

9 *'It was a relief; just so, so good being able to speak...It was so good to be able to communicate*  
10 *normally again instead of trying to mouth words. It was just so much easier'* (direct participant  
11 quote) (49)

12 'When this woman no longer had her tracheostomy tube and therefore was vocal at all times, she  
13 said "Look, I'm free! I'm so happy"' (author/direct participant quote) (45)

Table 3. Analytical Themes and Clinical Implications

Analytical Theme	What matters most	Data generated clinical implications	Source	
			Primary data	Evidence synthesis
Being seen as a whole, unique, autonomous person	Patients need to feel seen as a person as well as a patient.	MDT training should cover a) technical and b) compassionate aspects of care, e.g., a) suction technique, inner tube removal and cleaning, stoma care, humidification, pain management	(42, 43, 46)	(45, 47, 43, 50-53)
		b) behaviours such as making eye-contact, touch, being present at the bedside, establishing effective communication, social/non task-focussed communication with patients and getting to know them as a person	(43, 46, 43)	(42, 45, 47, 50-53)
	They need to feel they have some control over care and treatment decisions. Treatment plans should take into consideration patients' individual preferences and circumstances.	Patients should be screened for tracheostomy related pain		(46, 50, 54)
	Getting to know patients and their needs and showing kindness and compassion is as important as providing technically competent care and helps patients feel safe.	Treatment goals should be whole-person centred with full MDT input: functional impact must be considered alongside medical/surgical needs and interventions		(42, 43, 54)
		Ward rounds should address whole person needs, including communication, return to safe eating and drinking, information, and emotional needs	(50)	(43, 52, 54)
		MDT should involve patient in care decisions and activities		(49, 51, 53, 54)
		Team members should gather and share relevant person specific information (e.g., religious practices, interests, preferences) with MDT and incorporate in care plans	(43)	(48, 53, 54)
Making sense of it, coping, and connections	Patients want to know what has happened to them and what the future holds (e.g., prognosis, treatment plans).	Patients should be given education on tracheostomy: anatomy; function; impact on voice, cough, smell, swallow; weaning plans	(42, 46, 47)	(48-53)
		Patients should be given information on what has happened to them and future treatment plans	(46, 47)	(48, 50-53)
	Not knowing what has happened or is happening can be bewildering and frightening.	Quantity, content, and repetition of information should be tailored to needs (e.g., delirium, memory, cognitive, patient preference)		(49, 52, 53)
		Patients should be given opportunity to ask questions, with communication facilitated as needed		(46, 51, 53)
	Feeling connected with others reduces anxiety and the sense of isolation. Family/close friends are the most important social and emotional support to patients. Caring relationships with staff are also important.	ICUs should be aware of and address social and emotional communication needs of patients with a tracheostomy (e.g., wellbeing rounds)	(42)	(43, 45, 49, 53)
		Family visits and open visiting policies should be encouraged	(43)	(48, 50, 53, 54)

Analytical Theme	What matters most	Data generated clinical implications	Source	
			Primary data	Evidence synthesis
Patients' voices as currency in humanising care	<p>Having a voice is hugely important to patients. Voice contributes to patients' identities and underpins their ability to make needs known, participate in care decisions, seek information, and build essential connections with others.</p> <p>Family/close friends can mitigate the impact of voicelessness through helping staff get to know the person, which in turn facilitates communication and anticipation of needs</p>	Voice restoration should be given high priority	(49, 50)	(43, 45, 46, 48, 52, 53)
		MDTs should consider the impact on voice of interventions and aim to maintain/restore voice where possible (e.g. early assessment for cuff deflation and speaking valve use, selection of the appropriate type and size of tracheostomy tube, ENT referral, Speech and Language Therapy (SLT) referral)		(43, 45, 46, 48-50, 52, 53)
		When voice is not possible, personalised alternative methods of communication should be established, with consideration of physical and cognitive ability and referral to SLT if needed	(42, 44, 45, 49)	(43, 48, 49, 51, 53)
		Non-verbal communication should be as natural as possible to patient (e.g., lip reading if able to mouth words)	(45)	(51, 52)
		MDT training should be given training on supporting verbal and non-verbal communication and when to refer to SLT	(42)	(49, 51, 53)
		Family and staff should check they have understood the patient correctly to avoid patient frustration		(47, 49, 53)
		All patients with a tracheostomy should be provided a call-bell	(42, 53)	(50)

\*author suggestions and recommendations in primary study

\*\* author data and/or interpretation from primary study support this interpretation

## 1 Discussion

2 This review suggests a discrepancy between the evidence base on tracheostomy management and  
3 the primary concerns of patients; while researchers have largely focused on technical issues of  
4 tracheostomy insertion and epidemiology, we found that patients' priority was to be seen and  
5 treated as a human. This discrepancy has significant and potentially detrimental impact on the  
6 clinical care offered to patients.

## 7 Descriptive Themes

8 The descriptive themes in stage 2 of our analysis provided the building blocks for our analytical  
9 themes and the practice implications we inferred. The first theme concurred with previous studies  
10 that have found an inability to communicate is one of the hardest things ICU patients have to face  
11 and leads to anxiety, frustration, anger, and untreated pain (38-42). Alternative forms of  
12 communication and staff training have been shown to improve patient communication (43-47).  
13 However, supporting previous research findings we highlighted that AAC often fails (51), and our  
14 data corroborate previous assertions that patients most highly value having their own voice (28, 48).  
15 In line with theories of stress and coping (57, 58), our second descriptive theme showed that sense  
16 of autonomy and self-determination aided coping whereas lack of control could lead to loss of  
17 coping and withdrawal, with implications for rehabilitation and recovery. This theme also described  
18 the impact of being on ICU with a tracheostomy on patients' sense of identity and inter-personal  
19 connections. We found little other evidence of this in the literature. The third descriptive theme  
20 found many patients were fearful and anxious, which is known to be common in ICU patients (59-  
21 62). We found a lack of information and situational understanding contributed to fear and anxiety,  
22 and is intensified by voicelessness. Our fourth theme relating to physical experience identified  
23 sources of pain and discomfort that have been described elsewhere. However, pain and difficulty  
24 breathing were less dominant than experiences of thirst, swallowing difficulties and sense of physical  
25 restriction that resulted from being voiceless. We found that the fear of not being able to flag  
26



1 physical needs or call for help could cause more distress than the physical experience itself. Our fifth  
2 theme described positive influences on patient experience.

### 3 4 Analytical Themes

5 The analytical themes moved beyond the initial findings to develop a cohesive, conceptual picture of  
6 patient experience and provide interpretations of what matters most to ICU patients with a  
7 tracheostomy. This aspect of our metasynthesis of study findings was supported by a model of  
8 humanisation (Todres, 2009) (35).

9

10 Our finding of the fundamental need to be seen and treated as a whole person fits with  
11 philosophical theories of humanism (35, 63), phenomenological embodiment (64) and person-  
12 centred care (65, 66), and contradicts Cartesian views of mind-body separation or Maslow's  
13 hierarchy of needs model (67). We found that psychological, social and emotional needs of ICU  
14 patients with a tracheostomy were of fundamental importance, and that ignoring this risked patient  
15 dehumanisation. We suggested that the provision of adequate information that is tailored to  
16 patients' needs helps satisfy the fundamental human need to make sense of what is happening. This  
17 is consistent with the theory of 'facilitated sense-making', which, though developed to guide  
18 interventions to support families of ICU patients, states that when faced with crisis humans need to  
19 make sense of the situation and of their new role (68). Participants in our review placed great  
20 importance on relationships with others. Family presence brought solace and could facilitate  
21 communication, consistent with previous literature (69-71). In contrast, Halvorsen et al (2020) (72)  
22 found that family presence could in some circumstances be a source of distress, for example when  
23 patients were aware of the impact of their own illness on their family, and advocated a tailored  
24 approach to family visiting. Additionally, Broyles et al (2012) (73) identified that families often lacked  
25 skills to support their non-vocal relative to communicate, which could be upsetting to both family  
26 and patient. Interestingly, a recent development of facilitated sense-making has added 'patient-  
27 family communication' to the model(74). Staff relationships were also important, and patients

1 distinguished between two types of care: competent completion of tasks versus caring attitudes and  
2 behaviours, including efforts to communicate with them and being present at the bedside, echoing  
3 previous research (75-78). Presence in turn supports communication and information exchange,  
4 allowing staff to get to know the 'person' in the patient. The Humanisation Value Framework (35)  
5 concept of 'togetherness' may help explain why nurse and family presence and caring attitudes and  
6 behaviours were significant to patients. We found that non-verbal communication from staff such as  
7 touch was an important means of connecting which fits with studies of the role of touch in human  
8 social bonding, stress and pain relief (79-81).

9

10 Our review supports Happ's (2000) concept of 'voicelessness' in intensive care(82), which describes  
11 the complex impact of communication impairment on the feelings and actions of patients, clinicians  
12 and families. Additionally, we highlight the importance of voice to identity and autonomy, lending  
13 support to the theory of voice as an embodied entity as described in one of the selected studies (45).  
14 Interesting parallels are drawn between our study and Pound and Jenson's (2018) (83) investigation  
15 of humanising and dehumanising aspects of care reported by aphasic patients. In common with  
16 them, we found good communication between staff and patients was key to achieving humanised  
17 care. Interestingly, while we found that AAC was often associated with failed attempts at  
18 communication, non-verbal communication such as touch and eye contact was powerful in  
19 conveying caring and safety. It may be that this fits with findings of patients valuing naturalness of  
20 communication. Future research would be useful to investigate the apparent contradiction and  
21 explore ways to harness the broader spectrum of human modes of communication (84) to mitigate  
22 the impact of voicelessness on adults with a TT in ICU.

23

#### 24 [Clinical implications](#)

25 There are notable similarities between the clinical implications we identified and recommendations  
26 from the International Research Project for the Humanisation of Intensive Care Units (HU-CI) (85-  
27 87), a Spanish-based group whose aim is to promote the humanisation of ICU through research,

1 training and education and a certification programme for healthcare organisations. Unlike the HU-CI  
2 team, we did not identify recommendations for end-of-life care or improving staff experience, which  
3 is likely due to our research question and search strategy. The importance of patient communication  
4 is clearly reflected in HU-CI's standards (87), however, the principal difference in our findings is the  
5 fundamental importance of voice to patients and its role in supporting whole-person, humanised  
6 care. We suggest speech and language therapists should be core members of the multidisciplinary  
7 ICU team and that voice restoration is included in future outcome measures used to capture quality  
8 of care for ICU patients with a tracheostomy (see Table 3).

9

### 10 Limitations

11 The quality of review findings re inevitably impacted by the quality and availability of primary data.  
12 We noted methodological weaknesses in selected articles and limited ethnic diversity of the pooled  
13 sample, which affects transferability of findings. We also acknowledge the change in analytical  
14 methods from those outlined in the protocol with the introduction of the Humanisation Value  
15 Framework (30). However, we propose that transparency in reporting of the rationale for this step  
16 and its influence on findings justifies the amendment and it enhanced our review findings.

17

### 18 Conclusion

19 Our key finding was that 'Patients want to be seen and treated as a whole person, and having a voice  
20 makes this easier'. This finding should be used to inform quality improvement initiatives in  
21 tracheostomy care. We recommend that voice restoration take high priority in tracheostomy  
22 management decisions such as tracheostomy tube size selection, cuff deflation, and use of speaking  
23 valves. Staff tracheostomy training should focus on both technical skills and compassionate, whole  
24 person care. Improving technical aspects of tracheostomy management is important, but should be  
25 addressed in conjunction with, and not at the expense of, improving human experience.

26

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28

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