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September 2021

Caring as a double-edged sword: The effects of the caring discourse on nurses’ safety in COVID-19

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Citation of this paper:

Boulton, Margot, "Caring as a double-edged sword: The effects of the caring discourse on nurses’ safety in COVID-19" (2021). *Inspiring Minds – Showcasing Western’s Graduate Research, Scholarship and Creative Activity*. 174.

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Throughout the spring of 2020, the beginning of a pandemic gripped Canada and the world. By March of 2020 medical professionals including nurses were being called upon to provide care for ill patients in the face of PPE shortages. Nurses in particular were singled out as “heroes” during this time, and their identity as a “caring” profession was held out as a rationale for them to provide care in what they viewed as unnecessarily dangerous conditions.

Drawing on national media accounts, this study examined the narrative of nurses as healthcare heroes, and the underlying ideas about caring, with the contradictory reports from those working on the frontlines. Using the outbreak of COVID-19 as a context, and drawing on historical information from SARS, this study seeks to establish caring as a discourse and examine how that discourse may have impeded nurses’ ability to protect themselves from harm both then and now.