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Beaufort Gyre Exploration Project: Dispatch 16: Being a nurse on the Arctic Ocean

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It's terrible!! No assuredly not! It's a fantastic experience to work in these surroundings. Certainly, it takes few days to adapt yourself to this new environment. For me, it's my first experience as a nurse on an arctic icebreaker. But I can tell you this: the Louis is a big ship. During the first two days, I felt that I was in a big maze and found it hard to orient myself around the ship. Everywhere looks the same, and on some sides you have stairways that go down, others have stairways that go up, but not necessarily the same on each floor. I was very lost! But the most fantastic first impression that I have is the fast friendships that I have made with the crew members. This is a good thing when you know you will be on board for six weeks. And so far I have not been bored with all the social activities going on.

The other thing that I appreciate is the ability to exchange and learn about different subjects. On the ship they are many different types of jobs, which provides me the opportunity to learn new things. And I can say the science crew members are very approachable and enjoy what they do, so they share their knowledge with enthusiasm and passion. For me understanding their mission gives a sense of importance to this trip in the Arctic Ocean.

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Working as a nurse on the ship requires a capacity to be comfortable in an isolated context. The ship is a high risk work environment, added to the isolated surroundings. Sometimes depending of the weather and the ship's location, more than one day may be required to have access to a doctor's medical assistance. And if the patient requires medical assistance, the ship has to turn back to transfer the patient by helicopter to one of the nearest communities. There are not many hospitals in these regions. In most communities they have only a dispensary, so usually the patient has to be transferred by airplane to receive advanced medical assistance. In the medical jargon we call that a "Medevac" for medical evacuation. This is not desirable, so considerable effort in prevention is performed to provide a safe environment.

Most of the nurses who work on Canadian icebreaker ships usually have nursing experience on isolated northern Canadian communities. And this is true in my case. For the past 2 years, I have worked as a nurse in isolated communities in northern Quebec province with the first nation population; mostly with Crees and Inuit nations in James Bay and Nunavick. For me this has been a fantastic life and work experience. Even with the cultural and social issues happening in the first nation communities, I have met fantastic people that are working hard to help their communities. The people are proud of their culture and enjoy that they have the opportunity to share their way of life with me. So being a nurse in these communities requires caring with a comprehension and respect of their culture.

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