Final act
The final act of the drama is the death itself. Being there was a large part of the carer’s role throughout the dying process, but it took on special significance at the moment of death.

Being at the bedside was not as difficult as some had anticipated:

Paula (bereaved): “I thought it was quite nice because I’d never seen anyone die... It’s nothing to be frightened of.”

Being there was also symbolic of “letting go.” The concept of letting go of a loved one is characterised by a move towards acceptance of impending death, and the realisation that its natural progression should not be impeded (Lowey, 2008).

A family member experiences an internal turning point in which change is recognised as inevitable, and in the dying person’s best interests:

Naomi (bereaved): “It was just praying and saying: ‘Look, you’ve done ever so well and I’m really proud of you, and I love you very much and you can go home to Jesus now.’ Not that anything I could have said or done would have stopped it, but it was almost like releasing him for me. It was really hard. But he couldn’t have gone on like that... he was so weak.”

Nurses who have built up a level of trust with carers can guide them in the process of letting go by allowing them to talk about what it means for them, and how to achieve it. This requires excellent communication skills, but some nurses feel inadequately prepared for these conversations (Ford, 2010).

After the death and removal of the body, the curtain closes on the drama. Carers enter a new era with different challenges and uncertainties:

David (bereaved): “Coping with John’s demise was a dodged compared to coping afterwards. I’d have him back with all that hassle again if I could.”

Conclusion
Specialist palliative care services and end-of-life care initiatives emphasise the importance of supporting dying patients’ family and carers.

However, providing appropriate and effective support requires some understanding of carers’ experiences. This study has highlighted the drama of the situation for carers, and the anxiety of being the leading player on stage with minimal preparation for the scenes ahead.

Nurses play an essential role in supporting carers and can use this dramaturgical perspective to guide them in giving carers the direction they need to perform their role.

All participants were white, most patients had cancer, and all were receiving specialist palliative care. Studies involving a wider clinical, ethnic and cultural mix are needed to highlight perceptions, customs, expectations and needs across the whole population. NT