

EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION IN TEAMWORK IN HEALTH: A CHALLENGE FOR PATIENT SAFETY*

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ABSTRACT: This reflexive essay discusses effective communication from the perspective of multi-professional teamwork for quality of healthcare and patient safety. In the analysis of the object in question, it was identified that training programs for communication skills, practical simulations and standardized ways for presenting information on the patient constitute effective ways for overcoming barriers to efficacious communication. The adoption of strategies for improving the team's communication represents a challenge which requires change in the culture of patient safety in the health organizations.

DESCRIPTORS: Communication; Patient care team; Patient safety.

COMUNICAÇÃO EFETIVA NO TRABALHO EM EQUIPE EM SAÚDE: DESAFIO PARA A SEGURANÇA DO PACIENTE

RESUMO: Ensaio reflexivo que versa sobre a comunicação efetiva na perspectiva do trabalho da equipe interdisciplinar para a qualidade dos cuidados em saúde e a segurança do paciente. Na análise do objeto em tela, identificou-se que programas de treinamentos de habilidades de comunicação, simulações práticas e maneiras padronizadas para apresentar informações do paciente constituem formas efetivas para transpor barreiras à comunicação ineficaz. A adoção de estratégias para melhoria da comunicação da equipe representa desafio que requer mudança na cultura de segurança do paciente nas organizações de saúde.

DESCRIPTORIOS: Comunicação; Equipe de assistência ao paciente; Segurança do paciente.

COMUNICACIÓN EFECTIVA EN EL TRABAJO EN EQUIPO EN SALUD: DESAFÍO PARA LA SEGURIDAD DEL PACIENTE

RESUMEN: Ensayo que reflexiona sobre la comunicación efectiva en la perspectiva del trabajo del equipo interdisciplinario acerca de la cualidad de los cuidados en salud y la seguridad del paciente. En el análisis del objeto en pantalla, se identificó que programas de entrenamientos de habilidades de comunicación, simulaciones prácticas y modos estandarizados de presentar informaciones del paciente constituyen formas efectivas para superar las barreras de la comunicación ineficaz. El uso de estrategias para mejorar la comunicación del equipo representa desafío que pide cambio de cultura de seguridad del paciente en las organizaciones de salud.

DESCRIPTORIOS: Comunicación; Equipo de asistencia al paciente; Seguridad del paciente.

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INTRODUCTION

The culture of patient safety constitutes one of the major challenges for healthcare in the 21st century. The recognition of the occurrence of errors or adverse events with harmful consequences for patients and health institutions led the World Health Organization to appoint commissions centered on the identification of situations of risk and on the development of solutions which could serve as a resource for preventing these situations. The results of the commissions' works made clear the importance of communication and the work of the multi-professional health team as a determinant of the quality and safety in the provision of care to the individuals⁽¹⁾.

Studies have indicated that failures in teamwork and in the communication between health professionals have been one of the main factors contributing to medical errors and adverse events (AEs), and, consequently, to reduction in the quality of the care⁽²⁻⁴⁾. As a result, the way that communication takes place between the professionals has been indicated by researchers as fundamental for safe healthcare⁽⁵⁻⁶⁾.

Certain factors have been considered crucial for the development of effective communication between members of the health team, such as: eye contact, active listening, confirmation of the understanding of the message, clear leadership, involvement of all the members of the team, healthy discussions on relevant information, and situational awareness – this refers to understanding of the current environment and the ability to anticipate future problems accurately⁽⁷⁾.

In this regard, in daily practice, health professionals' difficulties have been witnessed in acting in sudden, unexpected situations which require fast action from the team members, such as, for example, in cardiorespiratory arrest, due to the lack of understanding of the role of each caregiver in this type of attendance. This context has compromised the quality and safety of the care provided, mainly to high-risk patients.

Considering the relevance of the issue in question in the field of healthcare and contemporary nursing, associated with the authors' practical experience of situations caused by failures in teamwork and in the communication between the health professionals, the object was outlined of presenting a reflexive essay discussing effective communication from the perspective of multi-professional teamwork, for the quality of

the health care and patient safety. To this end, an analytical reading of scientific articles was undertaken, as well as discussions held on the *stricto sensu* postgraduate course in Nursing, with triangulation of the issues of communication, the work of the health team, and patient safety.

COMMUNICATION IN THE WORK OF THE MULTIDISCIPLINARY HEALTH TEAM

Studies show that the professionals who provide healthcare have difficulty in maintaining communication which favors teamwork and, consequently, patient safety. Hierarchical differences, power and conflicts in the context of the work in the field of health have directly influenced how communication is established, causing the professional categories to work in parallel, to the detriment of the work undertaken as a team^(2,5).

Among the main challenges found for effective communication in teamwork in health, one finds: variety in the training of the professionals, in which training for communication may differ between the individuals; the tendency for a single professional category to communicate more within itself than with others; and the effect of the hierarchy, generally with the physician occupying the position with the greatest authority, a situation which can inhibit the other members of the multi-professional team⁽⁸⁾. Furthermore, the literature emphasizes the rigidity of the hierarchy, which makes it impossible to create an effective channel of communication with the different hierarchical levels, as it does not allow the sharing of the needs, and mistakes are not clearly raised by the professionals⁽⁷⁾.

Regarding the issue being reflexively analyzed, studies show that it is essential to develop structured programs for training in communication skills for the professionals directly involved (doctors, nurses, nursing technicians and physiotherapists, among others) and indirectly involved (managers and members of the administrative staff, among others) in the care of the patient's health⁽⁷⁾. Such programs have led to improvements in the performance and in the communication between the members of the multi-professional team⁽⁵⁻⁷⁾.

In one investigation undertaken with volunteers in a North American hospital, training was undertaken in communication skills with obstetricians and anaesthetists. The researchers detected significant improvement in the integration and collaboration between

the doctors of the different specialities, making the environment more favorable for adequate communication, which is also necessary for patient safety⁽⁹⁾.

Organizational silence and professionals' difficulty in expressing themselves in front of their work colleagues have also been considered to be a barrier to communication and teamwork. One study investigated the concerns which arise among doctors, nurses and midwives during the process of labor, and explored how these are expressed. It was identified that these often fail to share problems related to professional performance, the gaps in their knowledge, problems in their interpersonal relationships and the occurrence of AEs. In spite of recognizing that this attitude places patient safety at risk, they prefer to remain in silence, leave their current position, or be transferred out of the department. It was thus demonstrated that, when people do not express their concerns, the problems that they observe remain in place, a culture of silence is reinforced, and members of the organization become less committed⁽⁵⁾.

The strength of teamwork, therefore, means working with different people, with different skills and knowledges, for the management of a common problem; in this way, in order for the teams to work as well as possible, all the members must understand the skills and potentials of each one of their colleagues⁽⁷⁾.

Another problem related to the compromising of an efficacious communication process between the professionals has been the communication taking place during handover. Among the problems encountered related to this practice, one finds the omission of important data, lack of accuracy or consistency of information, interruptions and frequent noises which inviabilize the clarity of the message to be transmitted⁽¹⁾. An insufficient number of professionals has also been indicated as a barrier to efficacious communication, as fatigue can provoke distractions and, consequently, failures in the communication process; such as, for example, relevant information failing to be transmitted⁽¹⁰⁾.

In the light of this, it is appropriate to reflect on the necessary commitment of the health organizations and their managers in routine situations, in order to identify difficulties and challenges that the provider of direct care faces on a daily basis, so as to create an effective channel of communication with the hierarchical levels, and, thus, to allow the building of trust

between all those involved. As a consequence, bonds of trust are consolidated, needs and errors are exposed more clearly by the professionals, and the institution succeeds in intervening in the work processes and in continuous training, empowering the professionals so as to ensure a culture of safety and safer care⁽¹¹⁾.

STRATEGIES FOR IMPROVING COMMUNICATION IN HEALTH ORGANIZATIONS

Teamwork and multi-professional simulations

Studies have shown that teamwork results in higher productivity and improvement in communication and decision-making. In addition to this, it provides the professionals with improvement in their self-esteem, psychological well-being, and social support⁽⁵⁾. In this regard, in recent years, interventions have been developed, implemented and assessed for improving teamwork and communication. Many managers have made use of training techniques undertaken in teams based on multi-professional simulations, with emphasis on issues such as leadership, situational awareness, mutual support and trust, communication, and the role of each member in the team. These techniques have been developed for minimizing or detecting errors, improving team working skills, training/rehearsing complicated procedures, and identifying gaps in the knowledge of the professionals related to their areas of professional activity^(2-3,6).

Currently, this type of training is becoming widely accepted, and scientific publications are beginning to show its role in saving lives and improving results, mainly in areas such as delivery rooms, operating rooms, emergency medicine, anesthesia and intensive medicine, which can present sudden, unexpected and rare conditions, as they require a coordinated and fast response by the multiprofessional team^(3,10). Simulation, therefore, can be used in order to allow the professionals to practice concepts that they learned in a secure environment, as well as having the potential both to assist in the initial instruction and in the reinforcing of the concept. Furthermore, if undertaken on site, this is useful for assessing the teamwork and communication; moreover, it addresses gaps in knowledge and conflict resolution, shares lessons learned and also identifies real problems related to the patients' safety^(3,10).

Selfcorrection and structured communication protocols

The literature also indicates tools considered crucial for teamwork and communication, such as: self-correction, considered fundamental for avoiding errors and improving quality; team meetings, fundamental for avoiding mistakes in the formal transmission of information to all the members of the team, and for promoting team spirit⁽¹⁾; and a shared mental model/map, that is, mutual understanding of the problems, goals and strategies related to the situation in which team members find themselves⁽⁸⁾. Associated with these initiatives, there are also the structured communication protocols, such as briefing (beforehand) and debriefing (after) the undertaking of specific procedures, such as, for example, operations and births. Prior to the procedures, various topics are discussed which could lead to problems, such as comorbidities, lack of staff, tiredness, difficulties and techniques expected, among others, while afterwards the problems identified, and how the team dealt with them, are discussed^(1-2,7).

Standardization of information regarding the patient

Another strategy which has been addressed is the inclusion of standardized ways for presenting information on the patient, termed SBAR (Situation; Background; Assessment; Recommendation). This tactic provides structure for communication between the professionals regarding the patient's situation and condition, and allows the professionals to anticipate the next steps and to change their mental model, if necessary⁽⁶⁻⁷⁾. Other means with the same aim include the verbalization of information regarding what is important for the entire team, particularly in emergency situations, and the repeating back and confirmation of the information received, so as to avoid errors, for example, with dosage and route of medications^(7,10).

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

Currently, to have quality positive results in the health sector is a requirement in the management of collective work processes. Teamwork in health is complex, and is considered to drive transformations, with effective communication being the key issue. For a positive organizational culture, this aspect represents a constant challenge, and requires ongoing assessment, in which one weighs values, habits, beliefs, standards and experiences shared by the managers and professionals of the organizations.

Previous experiences in the professional routine, as well as literature, indicate that

inefficient communication results in unsafe care, being a contributing factor to unsatisfactory outcomes. In reflecting on communication and the work of multi-professional teams in health, based on the scientific production used in this essay, it was evidenced that communication skills training programs, practical simulations and standardized ways of presenting information on the patient constitute effective means for overcoming barriers to efficient communication.

Thus, an organizational culture whose mission is based in objectives and strategies with effective communication configurations will be reflected positively in the care processes and, consequently, in the quality of the services and patient safety.

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