

Communication Has Consequences

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On every level of life, communication is an integral part of effective functioning. Microscopic cells interact with each other to ensure the vitality of the organism. A breakdown or lack of communication can be detrimental to maintaining homeostasis. This is also true on a grander scheme as interpersonal relationships rely heavily upon successful collaboration. In the context of healthcare communication is a cornerstone of patient care. Multidisciplinary teams are responsible for working coherently to achieve a shared goal of patient health and wellness. The purpose of this paper is to analyze the importance of communication and describe an education session delivered to senior nursing students regarding their value of effective dialogue.

Operating within the restrictions of a 15 week course, and with the requirement to present a live education session, an initial interest in the intersection between obstetric and mental health care proved impossible for the implementation of the project. Broadening the focus to outpatient nurses, the Health Department became the next target. The collection of independent nurses employed at Cincinnati Health Department exhibit a high level of versatility as they practice in a variety of settings and coordinate with a vast array of practitioners. In the hopes of gaining insight from these veteran nurses while also providing education on the essentials of truly effective dialogue, a comprehensive presentation discussing limitations in successful collaboration was planned.

As COVID-19 overtook the attention of the healthcare world, the prospect of presenting to Health Department nurses quickly vanished. Adjusting the project to the new audience of soon-to-be graduate nurses, the realm of the problem broadened. In this generation of instantaneous and virtual communication are nursing students equipped with the necessary communication skills to keep their patients alive? Do clinical rotations provide ample opportunity to witness the culture of collaboration? Is there sufficient understanding of what

classifies clear communication? And do students really value effective dialogue? Guided by unanticipated forces, the project was adapted to this new audience with the goal of assessing whether or not students comprehend and value effective dialogue.

Literature Search

In January of 2020, the group's focus was based on the population of nurses caring for women of childbearing age with preexisting mental health conditions in the outpatient setting. Subsequently, the PICO question was manipulated multiple times based on the advice given to the group by its mentors. Moving from a more specific group of nurses to the broader context of outpatient-employed RNs, the group narrowed down the PICO to a more relevant and feasible question: With nurses who care for women with mental health issues in an outpatient setting, how does education on communication methods affect the nurses' acceptance of effective dialogue in comparison to no education?

To begin the search for relevant literature, group members individually explored databases such as CINAHL, PubMed, and those belonging to the University of Cincinnati Library. Group members utilized key words such as, but not limited to: nursing communication, communication between nurses, communication in an outpatient setting, communication tools, barriers, education, methods; effective dialogue between nurses, etc. In addition, attempts were made to narrow down the research to peer-reviewed journal articles published within the last 4 to 5 years. A total of 16 articles pertaining to the PICO question were gathered. The vast majority of the evidence was classified as a level 3 by the Johns Hopkins Model of Evidenced-Based Practice. The second greatest amount were classified as level 5 and one was classified as a level 1. A diverse array of information related to effective communication behavior, aspects of communication that support patient safety, the environment for the practicing registered nurse,

and communication implementation science were gathered. In addition, knowledge of existing strategies of communication standards and the impacts of communication training programs were compiled. Ultimately, the group was able to categorize the information into three themes that support a change in the practice of communication between registered nurses.

Evidence for Practice Change

Theme 1: The Need for Education

In the four years of training completed by this group, it was observed that nursing curriculum is less detailed-focus on communication and its value. SBAR reports reflect the basics of what is taught in school. During clinical rotations students do have the opportunity to witness how the communication culture of different units function, but oftentimes this leads to nothing more than the perpetuation of existing bad habits of veteran nurses. Charting in electronic medical records is a streamlined form of communication that is indeed introduced and explained to students, but filling in flow sheets and checking boxes does not prepare a student for critical dialogue. “Poor team communication has been cited as the number one cause of unnecessary patient deaths related to medical error since the 1990’s” (Vertino, 2014) and as Kanerva et al. note in their 2015 article, “[communication] is often assumed, and training and evaluation in this area have been lacking.” This is a dangerous assumption to make, and as the article emphasizes, “RNs are the first to notice changes.” As the immediate bedside witness, it is vital that nurses can competently relay messages to the healthcare team. Gimenez-Espert & Prado-Gasco (2018) acknowledge that, “Communication is the cornerstone of nursing care” and Streeter & Harrington (2017) describe “communication being the basis of all competent and safe care”. There is clear consensus that communication is critical to the art of nursing. So why is communication education practically nonexistent?

Theme 2: Establishing Mutual Understanding

In many ways communication is taken for granted. As such an integral part of everyone's life, little thought is usually given to what communication fundamentally is. When its meaning is considered, communication is often described as information exchange. This offers a limited and insufficient view of a much more dynamic process. To recognize how much more can be accomplished through a conversation, a broader understanding is necessary. In their 2015 research study, Manojlovich, et al. discuss communication existing within two paradigms. The first is transactional, which encompasses what has previously been discussed: information exchange. The second paradigm is termed transformational communication and is a process responsible for causing change. Eliciting change is a much more powerful form of communication than merely exchanging information. So what enables this change to occur? "Information must be understood before it can be acted upon" (Manojlovich et al., 2015). This development of understanding is the crux of the matter. The researchers argue for a more comprehensive definition of communication, "as a process of developing shared understanding which emerges by establishing, testing, and maintaining relationships between communicators." It is this interpersonal aspect, this relationship, that is vital to fostering mutual understanding.

Healthcare is a multidisciplinary, team approach. As with any group of individuals within every healthcare unit, "patterns and routines contribute to the creation of social phenomena which are then institutionalized so that a negotiated order emerges, one to which all group members subscribe either implicitly or explicitly, forming the culture of that group" (Manojlovich et al., 2015). Navigating this established culture in order to maintain relationships can be daunting, especially for a new nurse. However, this is essential for effective communication. A dysfunctional communication culture, such as one of blame, inhibits the

development of shared understanding. There is a fragmentation in the care team when critical misunderstandings happen, threatening the patient's safety.

Theme 3: Education Enhances Safety

Although designing a course on maintaining relationships with every individual member of the healthcare team is not really realistic (and may require a background in psychotherapy), there are existing tools and techniques proving that skill acquisition in communication is possible. One example is TeamSTEPPS, developed by the Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality, Teamwork Strategies and Tools to Enhance Performance and Patient Safety (TeamSTEPPS) is a training system designed to provide safer patient care through improving competencies such as communication. The implementation of this program proved vastly successful as patient satisfaction and communication techniques were improved significantly after a year long trial (Dodge et al., 2018). In addition, the COMFORT model was designed to train hospice nurses in end of life communication, and not only improved nurses' confidence levels, but also noticeably improved patient/family satisfaction rates on the unit (Fuoto & Turner, 2019). These examples show that communication training is indeed effective. However, not all units are equipped with the resources to train their staff in communication. A study in 2013 by Khodadadi et al. showed that, "the training of communication skills can increase the nurse's rate of communication skills and cause elevation in quality of nursing care... therefore, it is recommended that communication skills be established and taught as a separate course in nursing education." Providing this preparation to students will empower them with versatile skills to navigate and transform the existing communication cultures of the units where they obtain employment.

Project Plan & Implementation

While the original plan involved an interactive discussion with the audience, this became impossible with the restrictions from the pandemic. New challenges arose as the presentation became virtual and was redirected towards peer, student-nurses. The learning plan was adapted to fit and be more effective with the new change in setting and audience. On March 31st, the education session was presented to the University of Cincinnati Bachelors of Science in Nursing, Class of 2020 through a WebEx online audio conference.

A visual slideshow presentation began with a case study exhibiting a miscommunication culminating in a medication error. This real life example from a group member's personal experience took the place of the previously planned interactive story sharing, while still introducing the relevance and importance of the topic. Evidence from the research was then presented to provide information on what communication is, what communication education looks like, and why effective dialogue needs to be valued.

Evaluation

To assess learning from the education session, a pre-education survey and post-education survey was given to the attendees. Both surveys consisted of 4 questions evaluating respondent's value of effective communication. The pre-survey had 152 responses while the post-survey had 90 responses. This was most likely due to a technology error that inhibited respondents from accessing the post-survey initially. On 3 out of 4 questions asking participants to rate their feelings and values toward communication using a Likert scale, post-survey results revealed respondents rated their value of communication higher than on the pre-survey. The fourth question provided evidence that students initially had a high value of relational and non-verbal communication in nurse-to-nurse interactions, but after the presentation an equal number reported valuing and not valuing these aspects of communication. In summary, the evaluation

showed that overall, participants increased in their levels of valuing communication as shown on a Likert scale in response to 4 questions, with one question resulting in outlier data.

Recommendation for Future Work Needed

Upon reviewing the literature, communicating with members of the nursing community, and summarizing pertinent themes a practice change is recommended. Currently, not enough time is spent learning effective communication method techniques in nursing school. This results in nurses entering the field with less than optimal communication skills. Additionally, as evidenced by the lack of communication training and standards, the communication culture in the workplace does not place much importance on effective verbal and non-verbal communication; in this manner, any skills acquired are not developed. Considering that the nursing field is centered upon effective communication between nurses, with families, and the interprofessional team, this can raise concern. A required course in nursing school focused on effective dialogue, as well as in-service training in hospitals providing effective communication techniques, is recommended.

Throughout the project, the group worked very well together, likely due to the fact that the semester was spent learning how to communicate effectively, and subsequently utilizing these techniques. Improving focus and understanding limits challenged the group. From the beginning, there were big dreams for the project. Acknowledging the time frame and available resources led to several topic changes and more realistic goals. The time wasted from misunderstanding the parameters could have been better utilized in deeper research and planning.

Conclusion

In conclusion, by incorporating communication competency development into the requirements for nursing school, registered nurse programs will provide their students with a

foundation in communication skills. Through acknowledgement of the fundamental necessity of successful communication in nursing practice, an increased value will be placed on developing effective dialogue. Empowering students to skillfully participate in critical collaborations will greatly reduce the negative consequences of communication.

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Appendix A

Sarah's Reflection:

The development of this project greatly enhanced my final semester of nursing school. With the many adaptations of our topic, we remained versatile and flexible, invaluable skills for any college graduate. In working with several mentors, my level of professionalism was encouraged significantly. Functioning as a team streamlined collaboration and truly exhibited the effects of successful communication. It was enlightening to witness the research concepts in real life as the dynamics of interpersonal relationships fueled and shaped the direction of our conversations and ultimately the topic of our project. Each group member's unique skills and perspective allowed for much greater success than could be accomplished on an individual level. I am grateful for how the project culminated even though it was nothing like we planned originally. Effective dialogue elicited positive consequences from our many communications. I feel confident that my deeper understanding of communication will benefit my nursing practice, and my day to day life, in an invaluable way.

Emma's Reflection:

Creating this capstone project opened my eyes to a crucial part of nursing that I was not critically aware of. With my newfound knowledge of effective communication, I feel much more prepared to start my career as a nurse. Throughout the semester, our project changed dramatically. The final product looks nothing like we envisioned, but is something we are very proud of nonetheless. Our group worked fantastically together, navigating changes in concept, loss of an education site, and a global pandemic without missing a beat. We relied upon our knowledgeable mentors, gaining experience and learning to communicate effectively and professionally along the way. Overall, this was a very beneficial experience to me and I am proud of my group and the way we collaborated throughout the semester.

Brooke's Reflection:

Culminating to depict each of our abilities in gathering knowledge and subsequent integration as a unified group, this project taught me my own spaces for improvement as well as the invaluable competency of teamwork in the context of healthcare research. With heightened energy at the beginning of the semester, our ideas and words reflected a naive understanding of how to simply solve a problem in the world of academia. As a result, this project enlightened my awareness on using the delicate resource of time. In this context, time can be more efficiently utilized by developing a realistic question with palpable elements instead of less focused creatively large ideas. Moreover, when the time used is based around a shared goal of the group more seems to be accomplished. In addition, throughout this project I was taught that every personality within the team brings a necessary piece to the ending puzzle; in our case, this was the idea of the power of communication in healthcare. Although I may understand communication and define it in one way, equally valid are my group member's ideas on its contextual significance. Last, and one of the most significant things I learned, is that this ebb and

flow of interactions and development within a team takes sharp focus, personal sacrifice, and unrelenting commitment.

As I transition into the responsibility of my own practice, I hope to have a more organized process when using evidence to promote changes. Taking advantage of the intelligent minds of my future coworkers, mentors, and leaders, I will gather evidence and answer questions that have the propensity to initiate positive transformation in various situations one step at a time. In the future, I will inevitably be guided by this intellectual journey my peers and I have taken together.

Ali's Reflection:

The development of this capstone project has really opened my eyes to what effective communication looks like and why I should value that as a graduate nurse. I have learned how important it is to not only be cohesive in communication with my patients but with the other members of the patient care team as well. Working on this project gave me so much more insight and education on communication methods and where the nursing practice is lacking in this subject. I feel armored not only to implement this information into my own practice but be encouraging to my peers and co-workers on why this matters to them as well. Overall, my group worked really well together as a team and we were supported by our mentors who helped guide us in the right direction. Our project certainly came with its challenges regarding the global pandemic moving everything online but our group adapted seamlessly to continue to work together to create meaningful content.