

Use of WhatsApp Messenger for Optimal Healthcare Operational Communication during the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract : Background: During the COVID-19 pandemic, hospital management policies have changed frequently and rapidly. This has created novel challenges in keeping the workforce abreast of these changes to enable them to deliver safe and effective care. Traditional communication methods, e.g. email, do not keep pace with the rapidly changing environment in the hospital, resulting in inaccurate, irrelevant, or outdated information being communicated, resulting in inefficiencies in patient care. Methods: The creation of a WhatsApp messaging group within the medical division at the Bristol Royal Infirmary has enabled senior clinicians and the hospital management team to update the medical workforce in real-time. It has two primary functions: (1) To enable dissemination of a concise, important operational summary. This comprises information on bed status and infection control procedural changes. It is fed directly from a daily critical incident briefing (2) To facilitate a monthly scheduled question and answer (Q&A) session for junior doctors to clarify issues with clinical directors, rota, and management staff. Additional ad-hoc updates are sent out for time-critical information; otherwise, it mainly functions as a broadcast-only group to prevent important information from being lost amongst other communication. All junior doctors within the medical division were invited to join the group. At present, the group comprises 131 participants, of which 10 are administrative staff (rota coordinators, management staff & clinical directors); the remaining 121 are junior clinicians working within the medical division. An electronic survey via Microsoft forms was sent out to junior doctors via the WhatsApp group and via email to assess its utilisation and effectiveness with the aim of quality improvements. Results: Of the 121 group participants, 19 completed the questionnaire (response rate 15.7%). Of these, 16/19 (84.2%) used it regularly, and 12/19 (63.2%) rated it as the most useful source for reliable updates relating to the hospital response to the COVID-19 pandemic, whereas only 2/19 (10.5%) found the trust intranet and the trust COVID-19 operational email update most useful. Respondents rated the WhatsApp group more useful as an information source (mean score 7.7/10) than as a means of providing feedback to management staff (mean score 6.3/10). Qualitative feedback suggested information around ward closures and changes to COVID cohorting, along with updates on staffing issues, were most useful. Respondents also noted the Q&A sessions were an efficient way of relaying feedback about management decisions but that it would be preferable if these sessions could be delivered more frequently. Discussion: During the current global COVID-19 pandemic, there is an increased need for rapid dissemination of critical information within NHS trusts; this includes communication between junior doctors, managers, and senior clinicians. The versatility of WhatsApp permits a variety of functions allowing for regular updates, the dissemination of time-critical information, and enables conversing and feedback. The project has demonstrated that reserved and well-managed use of a WhatsApp group is a welcome, efficient and practical means of communication between the senior management team and the junior medical workforce.

Keywords : communication, COVID-19, hospital management, WhatsApp

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