

An Observational Study Assessing the Baseline Communication Behaviors among Healthcare Professionals in an Inpatient Setting in Singapore

Authors : Pin Yu Chen, Puay Chuan Lee, Yu Jen Loo, Ju Xia Zhang, Deborah Teo, Jack Wei Chieh Tan, Biauwei Chi Ong

Abstract : Background: Synchronous communication, such as telephone calls, remains the standard communication method between nurses and other healthcare professionals in Singapore public hospitals despite advances in asynchronous technological platforms, such as instant messaging. Although miscommunication is one of the most common causes of lapses in patient care, there is a scarcity of research characterizing baseline inter-professional healthcare communications in a hospital setting due to logistic difficulties. Objective: This study aims to characterize the frequency and patterns of communication behaviours among healthcare professionals. Methods: The one-week observational study was conducted on Monday through Sunday at the nursing station of a cardiovascular medicine and cardiothoracic surgery inpatient ward at the National Heart Centre Singapore. Subjects were shadowed by two physicians for sixteen hours or consecutive morning and afternoon nursing shifts. Communications were logged and characterized by type, duration, caller, and recipient. Results: A total of 1,023 communication events involving the attempted use of the common telephones at the nursing station were logged over a period of one week, corresponding to a frequency of one event every 5.45 minutes (SD 6.98, range 0-56 minutes). Nurses initiated the highest proportion of outbound calls (38.7%) via the nursing station common phone. A total of 179 face-to-face communications (17.5%), 362 inbound calls (35.39%), 481 outbound calls (47.02%), and 1 emergency alert (0.10%) were captured. Average response time for task-oriented communications was 159 minutes (SD 387.6, range 86-231). Approximately 1 in 3 communications captured aimed to clarify patient-related information. The total duration of time spent on synchronous communication events over one week, calculated from total inbound and outbound calls, was estimated to be a total of 7 hours. Conclusion: The results of our study showed that there is a significant amount of time spent on inter-professional healthcare communications via synchronous channels. Integration of patient-related information and use of asynchronous communication channels may help to reduce the redundancy of communications and clarifications. Future studies should explore the use of asynchronous mobile platforms to address the inefficiencies observed in healthcare communications.

Keywords : healthcare communication, healthcare management, nursing, qualitative observational study

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