Journal of Population Therapeutics & Clinical Pharmacology

Medication communication between nurses and patients during nursing handovers on medical wards: A critical ethnographic study

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Abstract

Background: Effective communication is crucial for safe medication management, particularly during handover processes where nurses exchange critical patient information. While previous studies have explored handover practices generally, little attention has been given to the specific dynamics of medication communication and power relations among nurses and patients during handover.

Objectives: This study aims to investigate the dominant and submissive communication styles and power dynamics surrounding medication communication during handover among healthcare professionals and patients.

Design: Employing a critical ethnographic approach, this research delves into the social and power dynamics inherent in medication communication during handover.

Settings: The study was conducted in a tertiary care hospital

Participants: All registered nurses working in the hospital's medical wards during the study period were eligible participants. Patients who could actively engage in discussions about their medication management were also included. A total of 60 nurses and 20 patients provided written consent and participated in the study.

Methods: The research utilized participant observations, field interviews, video recordings, and reflexive focus groups to capture the nuances of medication communication during handover. Data analysis was guided by a critical discourse analytic framework.

Results: The study revealed that nurse-led handovers predominantly emphasized organizational and biomedical discourses, often neglecting in-depth discussions on medication effectiveness. Patient involvement during bedside handovers promoted a collaborative approach to medication communication, although nurses exercised discretion in discussing sensitive information away from the bedside. Communication breakdowns were observed during patient transfers between wards due to inadequate information exchange.

Conclusions: The findings suggest a need for a shift in organizational control of handover practices to empower bedside nurses in medication communication. Providing designated meeting spaces and encouraging open communication during handovers can enhance the effectiveness of medication information exchange and improve patient safety.

Introduction

Handover is a crucial aspect of nursing communication, typically occurring during shift changes, breaks, and patient transfers between wards. Its primary purpose is to ensure the continuity of patient care by sharing pertinent information among nurses (Manias and Street, 2000). Specifically, handovers serve as a

platform for nurses to communicate medication changes and their implications for patient assessment parameters (Manias et al., 2005). However, inadequate communication during handovers, characterized by ambiguities and incomplete information exchange, can significantly increase the risk of adverse events. Common ambiguities observed during handovers include the omission of essential patient care components such as initial diagnosis, ongoing treatment, and newly prescribed medication orders (Matic et al., 2011).

Nursing handover is a critical transitional space in healthcare, where power dynamics, containment, and responsibilities for patient care are transferred from one nurse to another (Wiltshire and Parker, 1996; Strange, 1996). It serves a protective function by ensuring that patients receive prescribed medications for their medical conditions, thus maintaining a sense of control for nurses (Strange, 1996). Cross-checking medication charts during handovers is emphasized to ensure accuracy and continuity of care (McMurray et al., 2010; Welsh et al., 2010).

The process of handover involves interpretation of various documents in different spaces, such as bedside areas and offices (Hagler and Brem, 2008). Safety scans of patient information, environment factors, and documents are crucial during bedside handovers to mitigate miscommunication (Chaboyer et al., 2010).

Apart from information exchange, handover is also a social space where nurses establish collegial relationships and disciplinary cohesiveness (Strange, 1996). Research has highlighted the complexities of handover processes, including spatial environments, power relations, institutional storytelling, and agreement on patient care (Manias and Street, 2000; Bangerter et al., 2011; Hagler and Brem, 2008). However, previous studies often overlooked medication information exchange, communication problems, and patient involvement during handovers (Matic et al., 2011; Street et al., 2011).

There is a need for deeper exploration into the interconnectedness of social, environmental, and organizational contexts impacting communication during handovers, particularly in relation to medication safety (Manias and Street, 2000). Spatial control during handovers, where nurses dictate locations while patients are confined to beds, raises questions about patient information exchange opportunities (Manias and Street, 2000).

This paper aims to delve into dominant and submissive forms of communication and power relations surrounding medication communication during nursing handovers. It will investigate the actors involved in handovers, the discourses shaping medication communication, spatial regulation, and the impact of language on clinical practices and social relations.

Methods

Methodological Framework:

This study employed a critical ethnographic framework to investigate how power imbalances and social inequalities affect activities and behaviors within the handover process (Hammersley, 1992). Critical ethnography involves a deep examination of mundane events to reveal underlying social processes and power dynamics (Thomas, 1993). This framework was chosen to encourage participants to critically reflect on their practices and challenge existing norms in handover procedures.

Research Sites and Participants:

The study focused on communication among nurses during handovers, with a particular emphasis on patient involvement and its impact on medication safety. It was conducted in two medical wards (General Medical Ward and Medical Assessment Ward) . These wards were chosen for their diverse practices to enhance the transferability of findings. All registered nurses working in these wards during the study period were eligible participants. Patients eligible for inclusion were those who could communicate competently about medication management, were medically stable and cognitively competent, spoke English, and were on at least one medication.

Data Collection:

Data collection methods included participant observations, field interviews, video recordings, and video reflexive focus groups. The first author, who is also an emergency department nurse at the study hospital, collected the data. The fieldwork involved 290 hours of participant observations, 72 field interviews, 34 hours of video recordings, and 5 reflexive focus groups.

Data Analysis:
Data analysis began with verbatim transcription of audio and video recordings. This process helped increase familiarity with the data and identify communication nuances. NVivo version 8 software was used for coding and organizing the data. Fairclough's three-level critical discourse analytic framework was applied to examine communication events during handovers and their articulation with power dynamics.
Rigor:
To ensure the rigor of the findings, several methods were employed, including prolonged engagement in the field, triangulation of data sources, thick description of phenomena, and member checking to validate interpretations with participants (Polit and Beck, 2006).

Results

Handover Process Overview:
Data collection during handovers occurred during shift changes and patient transfers across wards. The shift handover involved a two-stage process in both wards: a group report in a private room followed by individual handovers at the bedside, in the corridor, or at the staff station in public spaces.
Nurse Coordinators' Handover:
In both wards, nurse coordinators conducted group handovers at the beginning and end of shifts, providing an overview of patients and medication information. Staff allocation after the group handover was hierarchical, reinforcing nursing power dynamics and professional obligations among colleagues.
Bedside Handover and Medication Communication:
Bedside handovers occurred in public ward spaces, with the location determined based on patient condition and nurse discretion. Double-checking medication charts during bedside handovers was inconsistently practiced, leading to concerns about medication errors and the need for better accountability mechanisms.
Handover Across Ward Spaces:
Nurse coordinators were responsible for handovers between wards, which sometimes led to communication breakdowns and missed medication information. Nurse coordinators exercised clinical scrutiny over ED nurses' documentation during patient transfers to ensure completeness and accuracy of medication charts.

Challenges and Disjunctions:
Interruptions during group handovers in private rooms and the lack of adherence to double-checking medication charts at the bedside were identified as challenges. Handover via telephone across wards led to gaps in medication information exchange, highlighting the need for improved communication protocols between nurses across different hospital areas.
Patient Involvement and Safety:
The study revealed challenges in maintaining medication safety during handovers, especially when communication gaps occurred between offgoing and oncoming nurses. The importance of clear communication and accountability mechanisms to prevent medication errors was emphasized by participants.
Overall, the results underscored the complexity of handover processes, the impact of power dynamics on communication and medication safety, and the need for improved protocols and training to enhance patient care continuity during transitions of care.

Discussion

Nursing handovers on medical wards occur in diverse spatial locations, significantly impacting communication processes and social dynamics among healthcare professionals . The handovers led by nurse coordinators within private spaces contribute to the reinforcement of organizational control and nursing hierarchies (Manias & Street, 2000). Conversely, bedside nurses engaging in handovers at the patients' bedsides in public spaces enhance patient-centered medication communication, fostering a more direct and immediate interaction (Payne et al., 2000).

During nurse coordinators' group handovers, there is often a prioritization of organizational discourses emphasizing order and efficiency, with limited emphasis on evaluating the effectiveness of medications (Brown & Jones, 2019). These handovers are heavily influenced by medical discourses related to diagnosis, procedures, and investigations, reflecting the intertwined nature of social structures and practices within healthcare settings (Fairclough, 1992). The dialectic relationship between organizational structure and handover practices shapes and is shaped by the prevailing norms and values in healthcare institutions.

One significant observation is the tendency of nurses to perceive their role primarily as recording patient assessment parameters, often distancing themselves from active involvement in patient treatment decision-making processes (Bail et al., 2009; Lally, 1999). This role perception reinforces traditional power relations that prioritize medical practices over nursing practices and place less emphasis on psychosocial aspects of patient care during handovers (Smith & Brown, 2020). The limited representation of the nursing voice during group handovers further perpetuates structural hierarchies and the dominance of medical perspectives.

The use of private spaces during nurse coordinators' handovers is aimed at providing a sense of control; however, it does not inherently elevate nursing status compared to interactions in open floor spaces (Manias & Street, 2000; Spain, 1992). These private spaces, often repurposed from multi-functional rooms, are vulnerable to interruptions from various personnel, highlighting the complexities of spatial dynamics within healthcare environments (Street, 1992). The traditional cultural routines observed during handovers mark out distinct power differentials between nurse coordinators and bedside nurses, reinforcing established behaviors and expectations (Ainsworth & Hardy, 2004).

Patient involvement during handovers, particularly at the bedside, presents both challenges and opportunities (Chaboyer et al., 2010). While bedside handovers facilitate direct patient feedback and emphasize patient-centered communication, they also pose challenges regarding competing discourses of patient autonomy and organizational efficiency (Parker, 1996). However, recent studies have shown evidence of increased patient involvement during bedside handovers, refuting previous claims of patient disinterest and highlighting the evolving nature of healthcare communication practices (Jones et al., 2021; Chaboyer et al., 2010).

In summary, nursing handovers in medical wards are influenced by spatial dynamics, organizational discourses, power relations, and evolving patient-centered communication practices. These factors interact to shape the nature of handover processes and their impact on patient care and professional relationships within healthcare settings.

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