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# Scrutinized with inadequate control and support: Interns' experiences communicating with and writing referrals to hospital radiology departments – A qualitative study

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## ABSTRACT

**Introduction:** Interns' experiences communicating with and writing referrals to hospital radiology departments are important for patient safety, image quality, and decision-making in the diagnostic process. Understanding roles within the department and in the diagnostic process is important for communication. This study aimed to describe interns' experiences communicating with and writing referrals to their hospital's radiology department.

**Method:** A qualitative study design was used. Data was collected from focus discussions with ten interns in three focus groups in Northern Sweden during 2012. The data were subjected to qualitative content analysis.

**Results:** One theme, "a feeling of being scrutinized and lacking control", was identified in the final categories. The interns experienced that the radiology department placed high demands on them and desired more diagnostic skills training, resources and feedback. The interns suggested the following improvements: enhanced dialogue and feedback, improved education, handy guidelines, and practice writing referrals.

**Conclusion:** Interns need more feedback from, and dialogue with, members of the Department of Radiology. They also need more knowledge of referral guidelines, appropriateness criteria and more practice to develop their knowledge and skill for writing referrals. They describe feelings of inadequate support and feel scrutinized in demanding work conditions and need more collaboration. They also need more time and more control of radiology outcomes, and they are eager to learn.

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## Introduction

After 5.5 years in medical school in Sweden, an internship of 21 months as a junior doctor (also referred to as medical intern) in internal medicine, surgery, psychiatry and general practice is mandatory to achieve a medical licence. These junior doctors are always under a supervision of senior doctors. During the internship the training in fitness to practice is elaborated. Since several departments are involved in the treatment and care of a patient, communication, and thereby collaboration between individuals has important role in patient safety. Tremendous amount of

information is daily transferred between different departments. Incorrect information in referrals to medical imaging causes more than half of patient safety and handover error incidents,<sup>1</sup> while passing on the patient information and the patient to another clinic. The importance of communication in healthcare is further discussed in different healthcare fields, using communication tools, for example, to enhance patient safety and quality of care.<sup>2,3</sup> The patient handover process can be improved with structured conversation.

A clear understanding of roles and effective communication are core competencies for healthcare providers.<sup>4</sup> Since several disciplines and specialities are usually involved in diagnosing a patient, both verbal and written communications are essential. Verbal and written communication is also considered vital for interns during interviews concerning critical incidents.<sup>5</sup> Interns consider the

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nursing staff greatly helpful during their learning process. In a recent study, Chang et al. reported that medical interns overestimate their ability to effectively communicate important information during hand-offs (i.e. information transfer) of paediatric patients.<sup>6</sup> This finding highlights and suggests shortcomings in interns' communication skills.

The radiographer's role is expanding as new areas of competence, like performing ultrasounds, barium swallows, and emergency reporting, are integrated into the profession.<sup>7–9</sup> The role expansion has also increased the radiographer's responsibilities during recent decades, due to technical developments and the ongoing radiology digitalization.<sup>10–12</sup> Among other things, the normal meeting point in the radiology department no longer exists, because the physical distribution of work has changed and the work as a radiographer therefore has become more independent.<sup>12</sup> Consequently, inter-professional communication and referral evaluations have become increasingly more significant.<sup>12</sup> Radiographers should evaluate referral content, particularly for quality assurance purposes.<sup>12</sup>

Medical interns write numerous referrals to the radiology department, but very often feel unprepared for their duties.<sup>5,13</sup> Interns in Ireland have *“reported...insufficient feedback on performance and an unnecessarily stressful work environment.”*<sup>14</sup> Berridge discusses the intern's transition from medical student to practicing doctor, acquisition of increasing responsibilities, and fears and concerns regarding clinical skills.<sup>15</sup> According to the model of the psychosocial work environment introduced by Karasek and Theorell,<sup>16</sup> job demands, job decision latitude (control), and social support are key concepts that can be applied in this area. The social support “refers to overall levels of helpful social interaction available on the job from both co-workers and supervisors”.<sup>16</sup>

Radiological examinations serve to generate image data for use in decision-making or diagnosis, while maintaining patient safety. The referral is the primary communication tool for radiologists and radiographers and a key source of information for conducting a proper examination. Errors or lack of information in referrals may therefore reduce the quality of the radiologist reports and of services delivered by the radiology department.<sup>17,18</sup> Referrers should be aware of the justification process and should balance benefits and risks of ionizing radiation before communicating requests, but this is not always done correctly.<sup>19,20</sup> The justification and optimization procedures concerning ionizing radiation and radiation protection in medical practice in Sweden are provided by the radiation safety authority's regulations.<sup>21</sup> To improve healthcare outcomes, knowledge of the competencies and roles of other health professionals is essential.<sup>22</sup> For communication between referrers and the radiology department, radiographers have an integral role as the primary receivers of the many referrals that they then use to acquire the image data used by the medical practitioner in establishing a diagnosis.<sup>23</sup> It is therefore crucial to continuously communicate between radiology and referring departments to increase the quality of referrals to support the radiographers in their profession. To our knowledge there is no study concerning this topic in relation to medical interns.

## Aim

The aim of the study was to describe medical interns' experiences communicating with and writing referrals to the radiology department.

## Methods and design

Qualitative content analysis is positioned in the naturalistic paradigm and strives for an interpretative dialectical

understanding of formative realities. As Polit and Beck have clarified the naturalistic stance towards reality signify a contextual construction in which experiences in the form of low-structured data, such as narrations of the people being studied, serve as a foundation for gaining knowledge about meaningful phenomena in people's everyday lives.<sup>24</sup> The current study was qualitative and focused on the interns' views, and their opinions and perceptions of their work environments.<sup>25</sup> The research question was addressed using interviews performed within focus group discussions (FGDs). This method works well when the researcher wants to establish the impressions, attitudes, and feelings among participants on a particular topic. The focus group is a more natural environment, compared to individual interviews, because participants influence and are influenced by others, just as in normal life.<sup>26</sup>

Study participants were recruited by purposive sampling of medical interns (52% of the groups of medical interns in the current hospitals were women) from three different hospitals in Northern Sweden: a small, local county hospital, another county hospital, and a regional university hospital. Requests for voluntary participation and accompanying information were distributed by mail. Participants were verbally informed about the interviews/focus groups. Only registered medical interns participating in an internship program were included in the study.

## Context

The three hospitals have an emergency unit and a radiology department, in addition to other healthcare units. During internship, medical interns have periodic on-call shifts in the emergency, medical, and surgery units. They contact the radiology department almost daily, but the frequency differs with speciality. The interns attend daily conferences in the radiology department, where radiologists and clinicians discuss current radiological examinations and patient cases. The majority of the referrals and reports are handled electronically. Radiologists are available for consultation during regular daily work hours. However, during weekends and on-call shifts, radiographers are often the primary contacts in the radiology department. Becoming a radiographer in Sweden requires three years of tertiary education, including a Bachelor of Science degree in radiography.

## Data collection

Open-ended and follow-up questions were posed to stimulate discussions during focus group interviews (interview guide, Table 1). The first author, a radiologist, moderated and facilitated, and one or two of the other authors took notes and posed supporting questions.<sup>26</sup> FGDs lasted between 45 and 55 min and were recorded and transcribed verbatim. Each group consisted of interns from the same hospital, and in each group some interns were acquainted with each other, but not the researchers involved in the study. These factors could be advantageous because familiarity and a common work environment gave the interns many shared experiences to discuss.<sup>27</sup> The goal in an FGD study is to have the required number of groups to provide a trustworthy, credible answer to the research question.<sup>28</sup> We determined a flexible target number of groups during planning, in the event that additional groups were needed. The target number was determined by ‘theoretical saturation’ which means that if no new issues were imminent, no further focus groups would be required.<sup>28</sup> Group interactions were productive and brought out fluid and rich responses by the participants to the issues raised.

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