



Research paper

An exploration of emergency nurses' perceptions, attitudes and experience of teamwork in the emergency department



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ABSTRACT

Background: Teamwork may assist with increased levels of efficiency and safety of patient care in the emergency department (ED), with emergency nurses playing an indispensable role in this process.

Method: A descriptive, exploratory approach was used, drawing on principles from phenomenology and symbolic interactionism. Convenience, purposive sampling was used in a major metropolitan ED. Semi structured interviews were conducted, audio recorded, and transcribed verbatim. Transcripts were analysed using thematic analysis.

Results: Three major themes emerged from the data. The first theme 'when teamwork works' supported the notion that emergency nurses perceived teamwork as a positive and effective construct in four key areas; resuscitation, simulation training, patient outcomes and staff satisfaction. The second theme 'team support' revealed that back up behaviour and leadership were critical elements of team effectiveness within the study setting. The third theme 'no time for teamwork' centred around periods when teamwork practices failed due to various contributing factors including inadequate resources and skill mix.

Discussion: Outcomes of effective teamwork were valued by emergency nurses. Teamwork is about performance, and requires a certain skill set not necessarily naturally possessed among emergency nurses. Building a resilient team inclusive of strong leadership and communication skills is essential to being able to withstand the challenging demands of the ED.

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What is known?

- Teamwork is essential for ED functionality to achieve its core business efficiently and effectively
- Optimal teamwork practices contribute to reduced error rates, increased patient safety, operational efficiency and staff satisfaction in the ED

What this paper adds?

- Emergency nurses perceive teamwork as a positive construct
- Emergency nurses intrinsically perform back up behaviour
- Emergency nurses are not necessarily proficient in crucial non-technical skills such as leadership, communication and situational awareness during periods of increased demand

Introduction

Teamwork practices have been identified as a vital strategy in improving patient safety in healthcare and more specifically in the emergency department (ED) [1–3]. EDs rely heavily on teams of healthcare professionals to carry out their operational objectives and core business of delivering care to the acutely ill and injured. The ED is recognised as a high-risk environment in relation to service demand and potential for human error [2]. Teamwork has been identified as an effective strategy to reduce human error, increase operational efficiency, improve job satisfaction and improve patient care [4–6]. However, few studies have considered emergency nurses' perspective of teamwork in the ED.

Background

During the 1990s and early 2000s medical errors and patient safety began to feature heavily within the literature. The landmark report *To Err is Human: Building a Safer Health System* brought international attention to patient safety across healthcare [7]. One

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evidence-based approach to patient safety in healthcare can be achieved by adhering to principles that promote team effectiveness [3,8].

Military and aviation industries have researched and refined teamwork practices for over 25 years, boasting standardised teamwork training systems that have significantly reduced error, improved performance and saved lives and aircraft [9]. Parallels can be drawn between aviation, military and emergency medicine, with each requiring rapid decision making using incomplete information, team orientated environments and with the significant potential for error causing harm or loss of life.

For the purpose of this paper a team was defined as comprising of three critical elements: i) two or more individuals, ii) with a common objective or purpose, and iii) who are interdependent of one another [2]. Optimal teamwork practices are reported in the literature to include features such as, maintenance of team structure and climate, application of problem solving strategies, management of workload and execution of plans, strong leadership, closed loop communication, shared mental models, role delineation, back up behaviour, situational awareness and adaptability [2,6,8].

While strong support for the benefits of working in multi-disciplinary teams in healthcare exists, the implementation of teamwork training in the ED is reported to be complex and challenging [10,11]. The ED is a unique setting that has increased risks associated with patient safety being a fast paced, high risk, and at times unpredictable environment. It is therefore argued by the authors, there is much to be gained through further exploration of teamwork practices in the ED environment.

Aim

The aim of this research was to explore emergency nurses' perceptions, attitudes and experience of teamwork in the ED.

Methods

This project draws on phenomenology and symbolic interactionism to explore the research questions; 'what are emergency nurses' perceptions and attitudes toward teamwork?' and 'how do emergency nurses experience teamwork?' Phenomenology pursues a key understanding, description and interpretation of human behaviour and the meanings individuals attribute to their experiences [12]. Symbolic interactionism theorises that an individual's actions are influenced by meanings derived or assigned from past social interactions and modified by the interpretative process [13]. Symbolic interactionism is significant to the participants' past encountering of teamwork, that may impact on how they currently experience teamwork and function within a team today.

Setting

The study was set in a single major metropolitan Melbourne ED.

Ethics

Ethical approval was obtained from the hospital and university Human Research Ethics Committees (HREC) prior to the commencement of this study.

Sample

Purposive, convenience sampling was used to recruit study participants. Inclusion criteria for this study involved all Registered Nurses (RN) currently employed in the ED. Nurses employed in a casual position were excluded.

Table 1
Interview Questions.

What is meant by the term teamwork for emergency nurses?
What are emergency nurses' attitudes towards teamwork in the ED?
How do emergency nurses experience teamwork in their ED?
How is teamwork implemented and practiced in the ED?
Does teamwork improve professional satisfaction for emergency nurses?

ED = Emergency Department.

The study sample consisted of 12 RNs, including one Clinical Resource Nurse (CRN), one Clinical Nurse Specialist (CNS), one RN with a relevant post graduate qualification, one RN post graduate student, five RNs who had completed a Transition to Specialty Practice (TSP) program in the ED, and three RNs who had not completed any formal educational preparation for emergency nursing. A CRN is an RN who works with Clinical Educators to provide on the job training and clinical support to nurses, in this case, emergency nurses. A CNS is an RN with specific post basic qualifications or minimum of four years' post registration experience, and is responsible for advanced clinical nursing duties. A TSP is a structured program for RN's designed to provide an introduction to specialist practice. The TSP at the study setting is affiliated with a major Melbourne university, and successful completion of the program affords graduates credit points towards a Graduate Diploma of Nursing.

Data collection

Semi structured individual interviews were chosen due to their capacity to produce rich, insightful conversation exploring participants' lived experience of teamwork in the ED. Interviews allowed for core concepts to be discussed, while supporting the individual to express their own ideas and reroute conversation in a subjective manner in relation to their experience and understanding [14]. The interviews took place in a meeting room designated by the Nurse Manager at the study ED. The interview questions are presented in Table 1. Interview duration ranged from 11 to 23 min.

Data analysis

Thematic analysis was used to analyse interview transcripts subscribing to the process described by Braun and Clarke [15]. Table 2 outlines this process. Furthermore, the process of analysis from quote to code to theme is demonstrated in Table 3.

Results

Demographic data

The final data set consisted of interview transcripts from 12 RNs, 75% ($n=9$) were female, and 25% ($n=3$) were male. Over half ($n=7$, 58%) the participants were aged 23–29 years of age, 17% ($n=2$) were aged 30–39 years of age, and 25% ($n=3$) were 40 years and over. The number of years' nursing ranged from 2 to 15 years, while the number of years working as an emergency nurse ranged from 1.5 to 12 years. On average the hours per week each nurse worked ranged between 16 and 36 h, with the majority ($n=8$) of participants working 32 h per week.

Interview themes

The emergency nurses described various examples considered conducive to effective teamwork, as well as those considered barriers or difficulties associated with teamwork in the ED, the themes and sub-themes are presented in Fig. 1.

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