

Research Briefing N° 63

Transient team work and communication in the operating theatre

This study looks at the effects of transient team work on the communication between surgeons and nurses in the operating theatre.

Key words: workplace-based learning; communication; multimodality; ethnography; interactional analysis



Key findings

Findings are of interest to policy makers, health care professionals and the general public.

We found that in transient teams (see definition below) more talk is involved in achieving routine tasks such as instrument passings than in stable teams. More specifically:

- In transient teams surgeons *name* the instrument they request more often than in stable teams, rather than leaving it to the nurses to *infer* exactly what instrument is needed.
- In transient teams nurses and surgeons request and provide *clarification* about the instrument that is needed more often than in stable teams.

What we did

The study is funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) (2012-13) and is part of a joint programme of research by the Institute of Education and Imperial College London aimed at investigating and advancing surgical care.

Health care is increasingly delivered by transient teams: clinicians step in and out of newly formed teams and often work with colleagues whom they have never met before. We investigated how the transient character of team work affects communication between nurses and surgeons during operations. A literature review was carried out and an empirical study was conducted in a London hospital involving nine surgeons and ten nurses.

Findings have been written up for various academic journals. We have also delivered a programme of impact activities, including an intensive simulation based training day and the production of a film showing how communication in the operating theatre can be improved (to be released end of 2013). We presented our findings to nurses, surgeons and social scientists at eight national and international conferences and in formal and informal meetings with staff at our research site, and participated in public engagement events at the Cheltenham Science Festival.

How we did it

A total of 20 operations were video recorded using two cameras, producing over 68 hours of film showing relatively stable and relatively transient teams working around the operating table. The recordings were made at two different sites of a London hospital. One site accommodates a relatively small number of different nurses and surgeons and surgical procedures in a small number of theatres. Another site accommodates a relatively large number of different staff, procedures and theatres. This allowed us to make comparisons between relatively stable teams and relatively transient teams. The video data were coded and the frequency of occurrence of selected features of communication was calculated. Strips of interaction were written out and analysed in detail, showing how surgeons and nurses use talk alongside non-verbal means of communication to pass instruments and clarify problems of understanding.

Implications

Surgeons often talk nostalgically about the time that they worked with the same nurse for decades, and therefore knew exactly what instruments they needed at what point in the operation. Now that health care is increasingly delivered in transient teams such knowledge can no longer be taken for granted.

The study shows how surgeons and nurses working in transient teams can and often do respond effectively to this change using talk and other means of communication; and what is discouraging some to do so.

It highlights the significance of talk in transient teams as a means to make explicit some of what may 'go without saying' in stable teams. Findings also reveal that what is currently discouraging some surgeons and nurses to use talk in that way is the old notion that 'having to ask' equals 'unprofessionalism'.

Further information

For more information go to: <http://jeffbezemer.wordpress.com/research-projects/transientteams/> and to the [project website](#)

There is also a short [YouTube film](#) on the project.

Contact

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