Role of care pathways in interprofessional teamwork


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Abstract
Cohesive interprofessional teamwork is essential to successful healthcare services. Interprofessional teamwork is the means by which different healthcare professionals – with diverse knowledge, skills and talents – collaborate to achieve a common goal. Several interventions are available to improve teamwork in the healthcare setting. This article explores the role of care pathways in improving interprofessional teamwork. Care pathways enhance teamwork by promoting coordination, collaboration, communication and decision making to achieve optimal healthcare outcomes. They result in improved staff knowledge, communication, documentation and interprofessional relations. Care pathways also contribute to patient-centred care and increase patient satisfaction.

Keywords
care pathways, collaborative practice, communication, interprofessional teamwork, patient-centred care

EFFECTIVE INTERPROFESSIONAL TEAMWORK is central to the provision of high quality patient-centred care. Uncoordinated or divided teamwork can reduce the quality of healthcare services and may result in suboptimal patient outcomes. Patients’ care needs vary and are often complex. Effective patient care requires the integrated services of a range of professionals – with a diverse range of skills and knowledge – since no single professional discipline can deliver comprehensive care for all patients.

Interprofessional teamwork provides a basis for establishing an integrated approach to healthcare that promotes and maintains the health of patients, while improving the effectiveness of healthcare delivery. There has been an increasing emphasis on improving interdisciplinary teamwork in healthcare during the 70 years since the concept of interprofessional collaboration was first formally described (Price et al 2014).

However, interdisciplinary teamwork remains a challenge.

Care pathways are an effective tool to support interprofessional teams, but their main purpose is to improve patient processes and healthcare outcomes. Therefore, few studies have evaluated the effectiveness of care pathways in improving interprofessional teamwork (Atwal and Caldwell 2002). Interprofessional relationships are rarely discussed during the development of care pathways. However, the process of designing care pathways provides an ideal opportunity to develop multidisciplinary teamwork (Atwal and Caldwell 2002).

This article explores the effectiveness of care pathways in improving various aspects of interprofessional teamwork, including team building, staff knowledge, and interprofessional documentation, communication and team relations.

Background
Healthcare services are becoming increasingly complex, requiring the contribution of healthcare professionals from many disciplines. The professional
roles of those responsible for the care of patients often vary between clinical specialties, but may also vary within clinical specialties. The knowledge and skills associated with multiple professional disciplines are necessary to achieve optimal patient care (Hunter and Segrott 2014). Therefore, healthcare services require interprofessional teamwork, a mechanism by which different healthcare professionals can work together to achieve a common goal. Interprofessional teamwork encourages healthcare professionals to work in partnership with patients and carers to discuss their care and to make decisions to enhance patient care and outcomes.

Optimal effects on patient care and service provision are achieved when healthcare professionals work together, learn together, and use the results of clinical audit to implement changes to develop their clinical practice and healthcare services. Effective teamwork can reduce the duration of hospital stays and associated expenses, improve patient safety and health, encourage innovation in patient care, and increase staff motivation and wellbeing (Borrill et al 2002, Allen and Rixson 2008).

Teamwork may be defined in various ways. Deneckere et al (2012) defined teamwork in healthcare as ‘a dynamic process involving two or more health professionals with complementary backgrounds and skills, sharing common health goals, and exercising concerted physical and mental effort in assessing, planning or evaluating patient care’.

Care pathways are multidisciplinary tools that ‘can be used to introduce best clinical practice, to ensure that the most appropriate management occurs at the most appropriate time and that it is provided by the most appropriate health professional’ (Chan et al 2014). Deneckere et al (2013) defined care pathways as ‘high performance work systems that improve organisational performance by strengthening relationships and coordination among team members’.

Care pathways were originally developed in the late 1980s. Since then, they have been used increasingly worldwide to manage patient care (Atwal and Caldwell 2002).

‘The aim of a clinical pathway is to improve the quality of care, reduce risks, increase patient satisfaction and increase the efficiency in the use of resources’ (De Bleser et al 2006). A care pathway ‘explicitly states the goals and key elements of care based on evidence-based medicine guidelines, best practice and patient expectations by facilitating the communication, coordinating roles and sequencing the activities of the multidisciplinary care team, patients and their relatives; by documenting, monitoring and evaluating variances; and by providing the necessary resources and outcomes’ (De Bleser et al 2006). Care pathways provide arrangements for the systematic provision of the best evidence-based care, by providing clear directions and guidance to support decisions, serving as a framework for patient-clinician interactions (Chan et al 2014). They can promote teamwork by strengthening relationships, communication and coordination among team members. Their use in healthcare enables organisation of care processes, standardisation of individual roles and activities, and the establishment of clear team goals and a team vision.

**Team building**

Care pathways enable the development of high-performing professional teams. However, this is not an automatic process. To develop an effective team, the team leader and members of the team should start by defining their team goals. Outlining these common goals aids the development of a team vision. This establishes mutual interest in the quality and efficiency of practice performance and task orientation, which includes clarifying the roles and responsibilities of team members.

KEY POINT

‘To develop an effective team, the team leader and members of the team should start by defining their team goals. Outlining these common goals aids the development of a team vision. This establishes mutual interest in the quality and efficiency of practice performance and task orientation, which includes clarifying the roles and responsibilities of team members’
team members may result in anxiety, defensiveness, confrontational relationships and a culture of blame that might lead to reduced collaboration (Harris et al 2013). Care pathways establish goals for patients and provide the optimal arrangements for staff actions to achieve these goals with maximum efficiency (Middleton et al 2011).

To develop an effective team, it is also important to clarify the roles and responsibilities of team members. Each member of the team should have a well-defined role. Care pathways equip all team members with a clear understanding of their role and what is expected of them. Central to team building is dividing care into processes or activities (Rees et al 2004). Care pathways are intended to improve joint working, minimise duplication and standardise the quality of care. Care pathways summarise the particulars of patient care in the healthcare service, assimilating and combining care plans from different systems. Such joint working enables healthcare services to offer a single point of access to an integrated service, avoiding duplication between services (Rees et al 2004).

Members of the healthcare team must overcome professional and organisational barriers (Harris et al 2013). Care pathways have considerable value in supporting the delivery of care across organisations, providing greater consistency in practice, improving flexibility, service cohesion and service continuity, and encouraging collaboration (Allen and Rixson 2008). The main benefits of care pathways in interprofessional teamwork are improvements in staff knowledge, and interprofessional documentation, communication and team relations (Deneckere et al 2012).

**Staff knowledge**

Care pathways are established by a multidisciplinary group and are based on a review of current evidence from the research literature, operational research and patient involvement (Ellershaw and Wilkinson 2011). They support staff in keeping their skills up to date through the use of evidence-based practice. Care pathways can reduce evidence-practice gaps, which may occur because of the limited opportunities for healthcare professionals to review their practice regularly (Davis et al 2006). They can assist with implementing evidence in practice and knowledge transfer (Andrew et al 2013). Care pathways can enable the formulation of clinical guidelines and direct their use. They are a recommended tool for integrating national guidelines with local protocols and can assist in the introduction of clinical guidelines to practice (Kinsman et al 2010). They can enable appropriate clinical practice in response to research findings and the results of ongoing clinical audits.

Care pathways have been used as a means to enable aspects of clinical governance in the NHS, by improving staff adherence to clinical guidelines and organisational protocols as well as enhancing staff knowledge (Wallin 2009). Continuous quality improvement is an essential aspect of healthcare services. Care pathways can help to facilitate and coordinate quality improvement on a systematic and international basis to improve expected healthcare outcomes (McCluskey et al 2013).

Care pathways are a means of formalising clinical practice. They offer structure, clarity and purpose, and enable information to be shared. Effective coordination of care requires each team member to recognise their own and others’ roles and the resources available to them (Schultz and McDonald 2014). Clarity about individual roles and responsibilities assists team members to ensure that everyone understands who is accountable for which aspects of care and for achieving which objectives. Care pathways enable new staff members to quickly learn the main interventions for different conditions and to recognise possible innovations in practice. They can also be used as an induction tool during the orientation of new team members.

Care pathways help to promote patient-centred care and may increase patient
satisfaction if shared with patients, who can then understand the plans for their care and evaluate whether they are progressing as anticipated (Kinsman et al 2010). These pathways provide patients and carers with information about who is involved in their care, what is expected and when it should be reviewed (Rees et al 2004). Effective dissemination of information reduces the risk of error, establishes trust and enables decisions to be debated rigorously to ensure optimal care delivery (Harris et al 2013). Care pathways assist with clinical audit, establishing standards and determining shortfalls in service provision or resources. They enable staff members to identify areas for development in clinical practice and to make improvements accordingly (Rees et al 2004).

**Interprofessional documentation**

Face-to-face communication and interaction is central to interprofessional teamwork, although documentation forms the basis for communication between healthcare professionals. Nursing documentation should indicate the thinking used to support clinical decisions and interventions, while maintaining information about the patient’s progress, although this is not often included (Blair and Smith 2012). Care pathways assist with improved documentation of treatment goals and interprofessional communication. They provide a framework for essential multidisciplinary care in the management of a specified clinical problem.

Documentation should include the patient’s clinical records and care plans from the members of the multidisciplinary team. The risk of inadvertent omissions is reduced by using the pathway; tasks will be allocated to specified people who are accountable for their completion, and where something is not done, this will be documented with reasons given.

Care pathways encourage team members to document any variations from the care pathway, based on their best clinical judgement. Variations in care can be collated for audit purposes and considered when improving the care pathway.

Care pathways can be an effective way to ensure patients receive appropriate and timely clinical assessments and/or treatments and that these are documented. Documentation of care within the pathway can be used to assess healthcare outcomes (Costantini et al 2011). They can also be effective in documenting communication in the team or with patients and carers, and improving the documentation of referrals and future care goals. Care pathways may be used to specify follow-up care when the patient is discharged and prompt referrals for this (Allen and Rixson 2008). Some healthcare professionals may perceive that the use of care pathways creates an additional burden of work for team members, because it requires detailed documentation. However, care pathways act as a communication tool for the healthcare team that combine the patient’s clinical records with care plans. Therefore, time spent on these aspects of documentation will be reduced.

**Interprofessional communication**

Effective communication among healthcare professionals and patients is important to improve the coordination and delivery of care. All individuals require sound knowledge of their role and the role of others to facilitate effective collaboration. Care pathways enable communication among healthcare professionals to coordinate and establish outcome-oriented care (Vanhaecht et al 2006). They also enable interprofessional teamwork by implementing an integrated system for communication and knowledge sharing (Rees et al 2004). They aid communication by providing appropriate and timely reminders for team members about what should be involved in the care of the patient each day. This prompts team members to ask questions where necessary and encourages communication with the patient and other members of the interprofessional team.

Care pathways can also assist with shift working since they provide a tool for information transfer and communication among the team members at handover (Nagpal et al 2012).
Care pathways enable communication with patients and provide access to a clearly documented summary of a patient’s anticipated care plan and their progress over time (Kinsman et al 2010).

Patients and carers value communication with team members and care pathways help to fulfil their requirements for information and clarification. They can also help patients and carers feel comforted, reassured and safe, and encourage them to have confidence in the healthcare team, which is an important aspect of patient-centred care. They provide a means for patients and carers to ask questions and raise any concerns about their care.

Patients who have their care managed using care pathways have realistic expectations about their condition and their expected progress (Middleton et al 2011). Therefore, care pathways can help increase patient satisfaction and reduce patient complaints.

**Interprofessional team relations**

Effective teamwork requires organisation and coordination. Care pathways can be used to improve an organisation’s function by enhancing relationships and cooperation between team members. The members of a healthcare team will vary depending on the clinical context, healthcare system and individual circumstances.

Each professional involved in a patient’s care contributes specific knowledge, skills and services. Cooperation is essential to integrate these unique contributions and establish relationships that enable ongoing recognition of the patient’s care needs. Each member of the interprofessional team depends on the others to perform certain aspects of a patient’s care (Schultz and McDonald 2014).

Care pathways help team members to share responsibilities. Shared goals and objectives contribute to patient-centred care and organisational efficiency. Participation in decision making enhances team cohesiveness and helps team members to commit to decisions. Furthermore, shared decision making assists team members to develop trust in and respect for each other’s skills, knowledge and attitudes. This promotes motivation and commitment to the team and its goals and strengthens staff relationships.

Care pathways can assist in overcoming professional barriers by supporting staff to cooperate and share new ideas and concepts. They may also help to strengthen teamwork and increase staff morale and job satisfaction.

Often, nursing staff may have considerable contact with patients and carers, but little involvement with the interprofessional team. When members of the interprofessional team make collective decisions, care quality and efficiency are augmented. However, care pathways alone are not capable of improving interprofessional relationships (Deneckere et al 2012). This may be because care pathways are designed to enhance coordination of tasks, rather than coordinating relationships. Therefore, care pathways are most effective at improving teamwork at the task level. To improve teamwork from the outset, each care pathway should have a clearly specified team approach, depending on the needs of each team.

**Conclusion**

Care pathways have been shown to enhance interprofessional teamwork. Specifically, they result in improvements in staff knowledge, and interprofessional communication, documentation and team relations.

The development and implementation of care pathways enables the roles and tasks of team members to be organised, enhancing interprofessional relations and specifying the observation, assessment and evaluation of practice, which assists in the development of a high-performing team.

Suboptimal teamwork can be a major contributing factor for adverse events in healthcare and improved teamwork through the use of care pathways can enhance the quality of care and increase patient satisfaction.
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