

Perceived impact and challenges related to the integration of Nurse Practitioners in interprofessional teams in a Belgian university hospital: a qualitative study

Background

Nurse Practitioners (NPs) can have a variety of positive effects when integrated in interprofessional teams of healthcare professionals (HCPs). However, the integration of a new team member could also pose challenges. Currently, three NPs have been integrated in two settings in a university hospital in Belgium.

Aim(s)

To investigate the perceived impact and challenges related to the integration of NPs in a university hospital from the perspectives of HCPs and healthcare managers.

Methods

An explorative qualitative study was set up using semi-structured interviews with healthcare managers and focus groups with HCPs teams collaborating with the NPs in a pediatric and digestive surgery setting. A topic guide inspired by the Normalization Process Theory was used. In total, four semi-structured interviews and 14 focus groups were held. All discussions were audiotaped and transcribed. A thematic analysis was performed with researcher triangulation to enhance the trustworthiness of the findings.

Results

The perceived impact of NP-integration was related to five aspects: (1) HCPs and healthcare managers stated that NP's fast capacity building and their motivation enhanced their autonomously working in practice; (2) NP-integration was perceived as leading to an improved quality, safety, and continuity of care; (3) better communication and information exchange within the interprofessional team and towards patients were experienced; (4) coaching and support of other HCPs (e.g. ward-nurses and physicians in training) by NPs was mentioned, and (5) improved interprofessional and seamless transmurial collaboration (e.g. improved discharge letters). Challenges were related to role unclarity in the team and feeling threatened by NP-integration, especially by ward-nurses and physicians in training; high work burden of NPs; practical issues related to the NP's limited clinical autonomy in Belgium (e.g. no prescriptions rights yet), clothing (wearing outfits aligned with nurses or physicians) and sufficient consultation rooms for NPs.

Discussion

There is a need to legally recognize NPs and extend their clinical authority so that they can work to their full scope of practice. Challenges related to role unclarity in teams and to guaranteeing educational opportunities for physicians in training should be resolved to stimulate acceptance of NP-role.

Implications and future perspectives

The results may inform other healthcare settings, healthcare managers and policy makers in health care who aim to integrate NP-roles and who are in charge of the legal recognition of these expert nursing profiles. It is essential to involve all stakeholders during the design of NP's scope of practice to ensure role clarity and acceptance of these profiles.