

Redesigning work to improve communication and efficiency in Perth hospitals

The SWANS (Surgical Work Team Advanced Non-Technical Skills) project is a research initiative that investigates how non-technical skills (e.g. decision making, communication) affect surgical, staff, and cost outcomes.

The research was funded by the Western Australia Department of Health to understand the impact of multi-professional team briefings on hospital outcomes. This case study outlines the diagnosis, intervention and organisational outcomes resulting from SWANS research.

The problem

Australian studies have shown that 22% of surgeries experience an “adverse event”. Of these events, it is estimated that 48% are preventable, and of these, 70% are the result of communication failure.

As well as being important for reducing risks to patient safety, communication is also important for efficiency, employee job satisfaction and engagement, and team tension.

Yet preventing communication breakdowns in surgical teams can be a challenge for several reasons.

First, the teams are **multi-professional**, involving nurses, surgeons, and anaesthetists. Having a diversity of knowledge and experience is necessary, and allows treatment to be informed by a diverse group of specialised professionals. However, when not managed effectively, multidisciplinary teams can be susceptible to communication breakdowns as each discipline can have different ways of communicating.

Second, many teams **lack stability**. It is not always guaranteed that surgical team members will have worked together in the past. In fact, sometimes team members may not even know each other’s names before the surgery. Lack of familiarity can make it more difficult to know their own and others’ roles, and make more difficult to predict each other’s behaviour.

Third, there are quite strong **hierarchies** in surgical teams, and differences in power. Strong hierarchies can make it difficult for the lower power groups to feel able to speak up.

Diagnosis

What techniques might you employ to diagnose the issue(s)?

The solution

What are some solutions you might propose?

Outcomes

What outcomes would you expect to achieve to demonstrate that your solutions were effective? How might you measure this?

References

1. Carpini, J. A., Flemming, A., & Parker, S. K. (2015). Multidisciplinary team briefings: a way forward. *Day Surgery Australia*, 14(2), 12-14.
2. Parker, S. K., Rammohan, A., Griffin, M., Flemming, A. F. S., Hamdorf, J., Leung, Y., ... Yam, C.(2018). *Success in the operating theatre: Multidisciplinary pre-operative briefings for efficiency, patient safety, and staff engagement*. Australia.