



PHARMACY TECHNICIANS' PERCEPTIONS OF INTERPROFESSIONAL EDUCATION: A QUALITATIVE STUDY

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Abstract

Interprofessional education (IPE) is increasingly adopted to enhance collaborative practice capabilities among healthcare students. However, literature focuses predominantly on physician and nurse experiences, with minimal evidence exploring pharmacy technicians' perspectives. This qualitative study aimed to elicit Saudi pharmacy technicians' perceptions regarding IPE based on participation in an interprofessional simulation course. Individual semi-structured interviews were conducted with 20 technicians. Inductive thematic analysis yielded themes around perceived value of collaboration despite reservations, opportunities to recognize profession roles, gain interactive skills, and dismantle hierarchies. However, technicians also reported feeling marginalized and that traditional asymmetric power dynamics persisted. Nuanced insights can shape more equitable, mutually beneficial IPE and collaborative practice inclusion for this integral but underrepresented group.

Keywords: interprofessional education; pharmacy technicians; perceptions; interviews; qualitative

Introduction

Interprofessional education (IPE) where students from different health professions learn interactively together has rapidly expanded in healthcare to enhance collaboration capabilities (Reeves et al., 2016). However, IPE has predominantly engaged medical and nursing trainees, with limited emphasis on involving other integral members of clinical teams, including pharmacy technicians (Hall et al., 2017).

Pharmacy technicians comprise the largest pharmacy workforce worldwide and undertake crucial medication management responsibilities (Schafheutle et al., 2019). Involving them equitably in IPE is key for effective collaboration. However, minimal research elucidates pharmacy technicians' perceptions of IPE experiences, representing an important knowledge gap (Hall et al., 2017; Makowsky et al., 2017).

This study interviewed Saudi pharmacy technicians after participating in an interprofessional simulation course to explore their perspectives on IPE engagement. Qualitative findings provide insights into their views of IPE's value, but also reservations around marginalization and hierarchy, informing recommendations to shape more inclusive, mutually enriching IPE.



Background

Interprofessional Education Principles

Interprofessional education involves interactive learning activities and exchanges between students from two or more health professions (Reeves et al., 2016). Key principles encompass collaborative, egalitarian engagement focused on integrating perspectives to enhance team-based capabilities. IPE is also situated in practice contexts to provide applied experiences.

Growing evidence supports IPE's impacts on knowledge, attitudes, skills and behaviors to facilitate effective collaboration in complex care contexts, leading to widespread curricular integration (Lapkin et al., 2013). However, truly equitable involvement of diverse professions requires further progress.

****Pharmacy Technicians' IPE Participation ****

Pharmacy technicians have pivotal roles in medication dispensing, administration monitoring, inventory, documentation and patient interactions (Schafheutle et al., 2019). This central nexus reinforces their need for interprofessional capabilities. However, pharmacy trainees remain inadequately engaged in IPE compared to physicians and nurses (Hall et al., 2017).

Minimal research elucidates pharmacy technicians' perceptions of IPE, which has concerning equity implications. Understanding their lived experiences is crucial to shape more inclusive initiatives.

Conceptual Framework

Mezirow's Transformative Learning Theory framed this study examining how IPE shaped technicians' frames of reference on professional roles and teamwork (Mezirow, 1991). A social constructivist lens also guided thematic analysis of their IPE constructions based on lived experiences (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Methods

Study Design and Setting

This qualitative study was conducted at King Saud University in Riyadh among pharmacy technicians who completed an interprofessional simulation course focused on training teams to manage medical emergencies.

Sample

A purposive sample of 20 pharmacy technicians was recruited for individual semi-structured interviews to elicit depth and diversity of perceptions. Participants were predominantly female (75%) and Saudi nationals (85%), mirroring workforce demographics.

Data Collection

The lead researcher conducted 30-45 minute individual interviews using an exploratory question guide on IPE perspectives. Dialogue elicited technicians' views of learning with other professionals, engagement experiences, interactions and takeaways. Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed.

Analysis

Transcripts underwent inductive thematic analysis guided by Braun and Clarke's approach using NVivo 12 software to identify patterns in perspectives (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Coding and theme generation stayed close to participants' narratives.

Ethical Considerations

The study was approved by research ethics committees. Principles of voluntary consent, privacy and beneficence were upheld.

Findings

Perceived Value Amidst Reservations

Technicians recognized potential benefits of IPE for collaboration but had initial reservations about their involvement. Many felt "intimidated" entering IPE, unsure of acceptance and contributions. Others questioned its relevance given pharmacists' higher status.

However, following participation, most reported gaining insight into mutual roles and seeing inherent value of cooperation. Reservations persisted around meaningful engagement and hierarchies.

Role Recognition and Stereotype Reduction

Technicians reflected that IPE enabled recognition of other professionals' roles. Dispelling stereotypes also emerged, with some reporting they previously underestimated nurses but gained respect through collaboration.

"I learned how crucial nurses are. We have to work together."

However, some stereotypes like "doctors know everything" still prevailed post-IPE.

Practical Skill Development

Technicians emphasized acquiring interactive skills for collaborative practice versus solely profession-specific capabilities.

"Before I only focused on pharmacy procedures. Now I know we depend on each other."

However, some struggled to apply general collaboration skills within hierarchical pharmacy settings.

Persisting Power Asymmetries

Many technicians felt marginalized at times during IPE activities and discussions, perceiving persisting hierarchy. They reported hesitancy to speak up around doctors and nurses.

"They didn't seem to listen when I gave suggestions."

Thus, while espousing collaboration, IPE culture still marginalized non-physician groups.

Discussion

This qualitative study provides novel insights into pharmacy technicians' lived IPE experiences. Technicians valued gaining practical collaboration skills and recognizing interdependence, aligning with recent quantitative IPE research (Romanelli et al., 2021). However, key themes emphasized persisting reservations around equitable involvement and power differentials despite formal focus on egalitarian engagement.

Critically reflecting on subtle exclusion and dominance even in well-designed IPE is vital to facilitate transformative learning dismantling hierarchical attitudes and enabling genuinely collaborative practice across all team members (Lapkin et al., 2013).

Targeted efforts supporting active technicians' involvement, continually engaging all groups in designing and facilitating IPE, and role modeling power sharing are advised to realize the full benefits of mutual learning and partnership (Hall et al., 2017).

Conclusion

Findings provide crucial insights from the pharmacy technicians' lens that can inform strategies fostering equitable IPE inclusion and enable this integral profession's collaborative practice capabilities. Technicians positively viewed developing teamwork skills but desired further culture change and involvement to dismantle enduring hierarchies through participation. Supporting active partnership for technicians will maximize IPE impacts for collaborative practice.

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