

# Improving Nursing Through Effective Nurse and Patient Communication in Saudi Arabia

Salman Wasl Althobaiti

University of Technology, Sydney, Australia

King Faisal Medical Complex, Taif, Saudi Arabia

## Abstract

The aim of this review article is to survey available literature on the issue of improving nursing care through effective communication with patients in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. In order to do this, a search was conducted on the open source search engine Google Scholar, which led to analysis of around 150 search results. Out of these, five were shortlisted using relevant parameters and analysed further. Analysis of these results showed that all five of the articles discussed the challenges faced by nurses or nursing students in order to then pivot to suggestions or recommendations for solutions or improvements. Moreover, researchers provided recommendations for improvement of communication that stressed the importance of education and training for nurses, in particular for expatriate nurses. Most noteworthy observation from the results was the fact that there appeared to be a strong correlation between cultural gaps or cultural competencies and communication. The article concluded with recommendations for further research in this area.

**Keywords:** Nursing, Patient, Communication, Saudi Arabia

## Introduction

The aim of this review article is to survey available literature on the issue of improving nursing care through effective communication with patients in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

For this systematic review, first a brief introduction to the subject of the overall picture of nursing in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia as well as the importance of communication in the practice of nursing has been provided.

Following this, the method through which the search was conducted has been described in the section entitled 'Methodology of Search'. A total of five articles were selected for further examination, given the parameters of the search as well as the scope of a brief review article. These five articles have been described in detail in the section marked 'Results of Search'.

In the next section, the results of the search are discussed to see what trends, patterns and observations are evident.

The final section draws conclusions to the systematic review that was conducted.

## Nursing in Saudi Arabia

Nursing is an important sector of healthcare. In the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, according to the Ministry of Health, there are more nurses than any other type of healthcare professional. For the year 2015, the total number of nurses, including midwives, in the country were 180,821. In comparison, there were only 89,675 physicians, 25,119 pharmacists and 107,323 allied health personnel. (Ministry of Health, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, 2017)

The government of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has worked in recent years to increase the number of nurses in the country after reports in the early part of the century showed a severe deficit in the country. In 2004, there were only 40 nurses per 10,000 of the population in the country. Even as of 2010, it became evident to the government that there was a chronic nursing shortage of 30% that had been worsened by heavy migration of nurses. (Lamadah & Sayed, 2014)

A significant portion of nurses in the country have had to be brought in from other parts of the world due to this acute shortage. At the same time, the Saudi government has continued to work to increase the number of Saudi nurses in the country as well. Despite this, even as of 2010, 74 per cent of the country's nurses were expatriates. (Lamadah & Sayed, 2014)

### **Importance of Communication in Nursing**

Good and effective communication is considered a highly important skill for nurses as it enables them to carry out their responsibilities in a more impactful manner while making their patients feel at ease. Good communication can ease a patient's stress or anxiety about their treatment, make the patient feel more valued and heard, and helps the patient feel in control of their treatment. (Royal College of Nursing, n.d.)

Good communication on the part of the nurses when connecting with patients may prove to be vital to ensure a successful outcome of individualized nursing care. In order to do this, the nurses must ensure that they maintain confidentiality, approach the patient with kindness and sincerity, extend good communication to the loved ones of the sick person, and undergo the necessary education to be able to carry this out. (Kourkouta & Papathanasiou, 2014)

### **Methodology**

A methodology for the search was devised in order to conduct an effective and efficient search that could provide the maximum number of results.

First, the open source search engine Google Scholar was chosen to conduct the search as it would provide an optimum number of results, but also provide results from various individual databases due to its open nature.

Next, a series of relevant composite search terms were devised that could be input into the search engine. These composite search terms are listed below in no particular order.

- Effective communication for nursing
- Effective communication for nursing in Saudi Arabia
- Nursing in Saudi Arabia
- Factors impacting effective nursing in Saudi Arabia
- Nursing and patient care in Saudi Arabia + communication

Each page of search in Google Scholar returns exactly ten results. For each of the above composite search terms, three pages of searches were considered. Thus, in total, 150 search results were considered for the systematic review.

Out of these 150 search results, the following parameters were used to narrow down the search results that were relevant to the topic at hand for this systematic review:

- *Saudi Arabia* – only those results pertaining the country of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia were considered for further exploration

- *Communication* – only those articles relating to the issue of communication or factors affecting communication were considered further
- *Value of Communication for Nurses* – only those results pertaining to effective communication for nurses or those mentioning the importance of communication for patient care or the impact of lack of communication in nursing were considered

With the use of these parameters, the 150 results were narrowed down to five which were examined in details. These are detailed further in the following section.

## Results

The five articles chosen for closer inspection are detailed below.

1. The first work surveyed, ‘Cultural competence among nursing students in Saudi Arabia: a cross-sectional study’ focused on nursing students in the country. The aim of the study was to focus on cultural competence amongst nursing students in the country, given that due to the high rates of immigration in the country, the cultural diversity present in healthcare facilities was also expected to rise. In order to assess cultural competence, 272 nursing students in the country were given self-administered questionnaires. The results of the study were encouraging, with students showing the highest cultural competence with regard to being able to demonstrate their communication skills with culturally diverse patients. The study also revealed other factors that may influence cultural competence amongst the students, namely, gender, academic level, clinical exposure, prior diversity training, the experience of taking care of culturally diverse patients and patients belonging to special population groups. The authors of the study concluded that Saudi nursing students possessed the necessary cultural competence to care for culturally diverse patients in the future but also suggested that given the Saudi Arabian government’s policy of increasing the number of local nurses in the coming years, more training should be provided to the students, including in the area of communication, for example with regard to foreign language training. (Cruz, et al., 2017)
2. The second work, ‘Nurses experience of communication with palliative patients in critical care unit: Saudi experience’, is narrowly focused, not only on communication, but specifically with palliative patients who are admitted in the critical care unit, or CCU. The authors’ central premise involves the hypothesis that while communication in a hospital environment is crucial, barriers to effective communication are common in the CCU. The aim of the work is to study the experience of nurses in Saudi Arabia with regard to their communication with patients receiving palliative care in the critical care unit. In order to do this, the authors carried out a cross-sectional study by using a questionnaire administered to nurses that worked in the critical care unit. 61 completed questionnaires were submitted, with a majority being from female nurses. The results of analysis showed that 41 per cent of the nurses had experienced difficulties or complications in communicating with their patients in palliative care. In specific, the nurses described challenges in discussion of important issues, such as advanced directives, do not resuscitate orders, and feeding tubes. The authors concluded that one of the reasons that nurses find communication difficult is the fact that palliative care is complex. Additionally, language barriers and shortage of staff also provided challenges. Last the authors concluded that there is significant gap in education programmes that aid nurses in communicating with patients in palliative care. (Alshehri & Ismaile, 2016)

3. The third work, 'Culture and language differences as a barrier to provision of quality care by the health workforce in Saudi Arabia' focuses on the culture and language differences that cause communication barriers in the provision of quality healthcare in the country. Unlike the other works, this one does not focus exclusively on nurses; however, given the milieu of Saudi Arabia and the aforementioned fact that nurses comprise the largest percentage of the healthcare workforce, the results can be interpreted for nurses as well. This work functions as a systematic review. Two independent researchers conducted a systematic review using four different electronic databases. The researchers focused on published articles from a specific time period from January 2000 to March 2014. The studies were then evaluated and ranked between being weak, moderate or strong. Articles were also evaluated for methodological soundness using Russell and Gregory's criteria. As a result of the systematic review, the researchers found 12 articles that were examined further. These showed that lack of adequate knowledge about non-Muslim nurses or culture in Saudi Arabia, difficulties in achieving cultural competence, and culture shock were documented as cultural difference factors. Apart from this, there were issues in language, with difficulty in understanding information provided by healthcare workers as well with communicating adequate information to explain the healthcare activities being undertaken to the patient. The authors conclude by making recommendations, including improving the educational and orientation programs regarding the culture and language in Saudi Arabia that are made available to healthcare workers. (Almutairi, 2015)
4. The next work, 'Role of language and communication in providing quality healthcare by expatriate nurses in Saudi Arabia', focuses on expatriate nurses and communication issues in particular. Given the high numbers of expatriate nurses in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, the author posits that their presence has serious implications for patient care, due to the cultural, language and communication barriers between the two parties. The author contends that these gaps can have an adverse effect and compromise the quality of care given to Saudi Arabian patients. Moreover, the author reiterates that since the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is an Islamic nation with strict adherence to Islamic cultural and traditional values, there is a gap with foreign nurses in understanding these issues. Thus, this may affect the ability of the foreign nurses to communicate effectively with their patients. In conclusion, the author believes that there needs to be education and maintenance of Saudi Arabian cultural values in healthcare, such as maintenance of modesty, specific care for each gender, proper communication process and the spiritual needs of the patient. Apart from this, the author also recommends the presence of translators where language barriers may exist to ensure communication is not compromised. Overall, the author stresses that education for the expatriate nurses is essential to help them deal well with the nuances of Saudi Arabian culture and ensure that they are able to communicate effectively by taking into account cultural sensitivities. (Albougami, 2015)
5. The fifth and final research work analysed for this systematic review, 'Caring for patients of Islamic denomination: critical care nurses' experiences in Saudi Arabia' focused on the experiences of six expatriate critical care nurses in Saudi Arabia to illustrate their challenges in dealing with patients. Specifically, these nurses were asked about their experiences in dealing with Muslim patients. The answers provided by the nurses were analysed using Colaizzi's framework. Three themes emerged from the analysis, namely, family and kinship ties, cultural and religious influences and the nurse-patient

relationship. The analysis revealed that the nurses felt that communicating with their patients as well as their families was a constant challenge or battle. Moreover, this gap in communication served to further stress their ability to help meet the needs of their patients and their families. The author concludes that the religious and cultural beliefs and practices of Muslim patients in Saudi Arabia, as perceived by expatriate nurses, may have an effect on the care provided to the patient. (Halligan, 2006)

## **Discussion**

The analysis of the five chosen scholarly works revealed some interesting observations.

All five of the articles discussed the challenges faced by nurses or nursing students in order to then pivot to suggestions or recommendations for solutions. Thus, the approach of the researchers was uniform in that they were attempting to understand where the gaps in communication lay in order to find methods by which these gaps could be closed, thereby improving communication and providing effective nursing care for patients.

Also interesting was the fact that all of the researchers providing recommendations for improvement of communication stressed the importance of education and training for nurses, in particular for expatriate nurses.

Most noteworthy was the fact that there appeared to be a strong correlation between cultural gaps or cultural competencies and communication. Barring the second scholarly work, all four others discussed culture as an integral aspect of communication or lack thereof. One explanation of this is the fact there are two inter-linked issues that are cultural and challenge communication between patients and nurses. One, there are a high number of expatriate nurses within the country of Saudi Arabia due to the shortage of qualified personnel and the increasing healthcare burden within the country. Two, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is a traditional Islamic country with strict adherence to Islamic cultural and traditional values and practices. In combination, these two factors appear to be key to the barriers of communication between the nurses and patients. For example, there were recommendations of language lessons to the expatriate nurses so that they can communicate with patients and their families in Arabic.

Two out of five articles also focused specifically on the issues or challenges faced by nurses dealing with critical care patients. Possibly due to the higher level of care required for critical care patients, this has proven to be an important avenue of exploration.

## **Conclusion**

While some research has been done on the issue of how effective communication can be improved amongst nurses in order to better care provided to patients, specific to the conditions in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, there are still some research gaps that need to be addressed.

The exact nature of the relationship between cultural competencies and communication between patients and nurses, specific to the context of Saudi Arabia, is one such avenue. While there does appear to be a correlation, there needs to be more clarity on how these two factors inter-link and affect each other.

Given the increasing diversity of patients in Saudi Arabia as well as the high number of expatriate nurses in the country, it is also important to study how this diversity of religions, cultures and languages may affect communication between nurses and patients, and how any potential gaps may be eliminated.

Overall, while there is some rich scholarship on the issue, as covered by this systematic review, there are still opportunities for researchers to better understand the challenges faced by both nurses and patients in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

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