

Interdisciplinary Teamwork in Intensive Care Units

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Abstract:

Introduction: Teamwork is seen as a way of containing the problems facing current healthcare while promoting organisational efficiency, safety, and quality. Problems mainly arising due to a rapidly changing healthcare context driven by an ageing population with increased needs for healthcare services and an ageing health workforce faced with work overload. The current study, using intensive care units (ICU) as an example of a particularly complex health setting, explores the challenges and drivers of efficient team practice from the interdisciplinary perspective of senior and junior professionals. Membership of the 'ICU team' is fluid and often implicit, maintained or disrupted via a complex web of both internalised processes and external forces such as unit management and hospital administration. In the seemingly chaotic world of ICU practice, order may be achieved by identifying underlying rules and tacit knowledge. Ethnographic approaches are a means of gaining in-depth understanding of the processes of teamwork not easily accessible by other methods. Although the ethnographical approach is widely discussed in textbooks, limited advice is offered about methodological and practical challenges in conducting ethnography in complex healthcare settings.

Method: This study of teamwork practices in two London ICUs follows an ethnographic approach, incorporating observational and interview data collection methods to elicit understanding of the social processes that enable teamwork in ICUs. Data are collected in-situ via fieldnote entries, contemporaneous notes of actual ICU practice, and formal and informal discussions with healthcare professionals associated with each Unit.

Discussion: Drawing on the historical origins and methodological principles of ethnographical approaches, methodological decision making and challenges faced in the conduct the current research are presented. Although ethnographical research has been referred to as a 'slippery business', knowing potential pitfalls and ways of overcoming them would help to ensure the conduct of a successful study.

Conclusion: Experience gained in the process of conducting ethnographical research in a complex healthcare setting offer practical advice for future endeavours.