

Title: Family Meetings- an exploratory study of the views and experiences of older patients, family members and the multidisciplinary team in a hospital setting.

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Background: Family meetings are an increasingly common decision-making forum in the hospital setting but there is limited research into the process and experience of such meetings. Although this forum is intended to encourage active participation and empowerment of older people and their families in decision making, doubts exist about whether this happens in practice. We carried out a pilot study to explore patient and family experiences of family meetings.

Method: This study explored the experiences of participants in family meetings in a clinical setting using an ethnographic approach with a convenience sample of ten family meetings with inpatients of a department of geriatric medicine. A mixed method study design was adopted which included participant observations of family meetings, questionnaires and staff focus groups.

Results: All of the inpatients were >65, and seven had some degree of cognitive impairment. Results showed some fundamental differences in opinions from staff about the purpose and outcomes of family meetings. Participation levels of older people varied considerably: those with higher levels of cognitive impairment had noticeably lower levels of participation. Participation levels of family members was noted to be much higher. All older people who attended, and eight of the families believed they had been included in the decision making process. Two families reported that final decisions had already been made by staff and, although dissatisfied with the outcome, still felt that the meeting process had been useful.

Discussion: This study raises questions about the inclusive nature of family meetings and whether decisions are really made in partnership. The divergence in viewpoints from staff about the purpose of these meetings is consistent with experiences of the older person and their family and this is informing our further research into family meetings.