

Evaluating the Effectiveness of Health Assistants in Facilitating Communication Between Patients and Healthcare Providers: A Qualitative Inquiry in Hafr Al-batin Hospitals

Mashari Abdullah A Alshammari¹, Fuhaid Ytaiym R Aldhafeeri², Abdulaziz Abdullah A Alshammari³, Fahhad Yataim R Aldhafeeri⁴, Ghanem Silfiq Duhaysan Aldhafeeri⁵, Abdullah Shelaitan M Aldhafeeri⁶

^{1,2,3,4,5,6}Health Assistant Nursing

Received: 16.09.2024

Revised: 13.10.2024

Accepted: 28.11.2024

ABSTRACT

Effective communication between patients and healthcare providers is essential for delivering high-quality care and improving patient outcomes. Health assistants play a crucial role in facilitating this communication, particularly in Saudi Arabian hospitals where language and cultural barriers may exist. This qualitative study aims to evaluate the effectiveness of health assistants in facilitating communication between patients and healthcare providers in Hafr Al-batin hospitals. Through semi-structured interviews with health assistants, patients, and healthcare providers, the study explores the perspectives and experiences of these stakeholders regarding the role of health assistants in enhancing communication and patient care. The findings reveal that health assistants contribute significantly to bridging communication gaps, providing language support, and assisting patients in navigating the healthcare system. However, challenges such as workload, limited training, and role ambiguity are identified as potential barriers to the effectiveness of health assistants. The study provides valuable insights into the importance of health assistants in facilitating communication and offers recommendations for healthcare organizations to optimize their roles and improve patient-provider communication in Saudi Arabian hospitals.

Keywords: health assistants, patient-provider communication, qualitative research, Saudi Arabia, healthcare quality

1. INTRODUCTION

Effective communication between patients and healthcare providers is a fundamental aspect of delivering high-quality healthcare services. Clear and open communication enables patients to express their concerns, understand their health conditions, and actively participate in their care (Alshammari et al., 2019). However, various barriers, such as language differences, cultural norms, and health literacy levels, can hinder effective communication in healthcare settings (Al-Harasis, 2013).

In Saudi Arabian hospitals, these communication barriers are particularly prevalent due to the diverse patient population and the presence of expatriate healthcare workers (Alshammari et al., 2019). To address these challenges, health assistants have emerged as a vital workforce in facilitating communication between patients and healthcare providers (Alboliteeh et al., 2017). Health assistants, also known as patient care assistants or nursing assistants, provide support to patients and healthcare teams by assisting with various tasks, including communication, translation, and patient education (Alotaibi, 2015).

Despite the growing recognition of the importance of health assistants in Saudi Arabian healthcare settings, there is limited research examining their effectiveness in facilitating communication between patients and healthcare providers. This qualitative study aims to address this gap by exploring the perspectives and experiences of health assistants, patients, and healthcare providers regarding the role of health assistants in enhancing communication and patient care in Hafr Al-batin hospitals.

The objectives of this study are as follows:

1. To evaluate the effectiveness of health assistants in facilitating communication between patients and healthcare providers in Hafr Al-batin hospitals.
2. To explore the perspectives and experiences of health assistants, patients, and healthcare providers regarding the role of health assistants in enhancing communication and patient care.
3. To identify the challenges and barriers faced by health assistants in facilitating effective communication between patients and healthcare providers.

4. To provide recommendations for healthcare organizations to optimize the roles of health assistants and improve patient-provider communication in Saudi Arabian hospitals.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature review section synthesizes existing research on the role of health assistants in facilitating communication between patients and healthcare providers, with a specific focus on the Saudi Arabian healthcare context.

2.1 Patient-Provider Communication in Healthcare

Effective patient-provider communication is essential for delivering high-quality healthcare services and improving patient outcomes (Alqahtani et al., 2017). Clear communication enables patients to express their concerns, understand their health conditions, and actively participate in their care (Alshammari et al., 2019). Effective communication has been associated with increased patient satisfaction, adherence to treatment plans, and better health outcomes (Alamri, 2019).

However, various barriers can hinder effective communication in healthcare settings, including language differences, cultural norms, health literacy levels, and time constraints (Al-Harasis, 2013). These barriers can lead to misunderstandings, miscommunication, and poor patient outcomes (Alshahrani et al., 2019).

2.2 Challenges in Patient-Provider Communication in Saudi Arabia

In Saudi Arabian healthcare settings, communication barriers are particularly prevalent due to the diverse patient population and the presence of expatriate healthcare workers (Alshammari et al., 2019). Language differences between patients and healthcare providers can hinder effective communication, as many patients may not be fluent in the language spoken by healthcare providers (Al-Harasis, 2013). Cultural norms and beliefs can also influence communication, as patients may have different expectations and preferences regarding their healthcare (Alqahtani et al., 2017).

Moreover, the high workload and time constraints faced by healthcare providers in Saudi Arabian hospitals can limit their ability to engage in effective communication with patients (Alboliteeh et al., 2017). These challenges highlight the need for strategies and interventions to improve patient-provider communication in Saudi Arabian healthcare settings (Alshammari et al., 2019).

2.3 Role of Health Assistants in Facilitating Communication

Health assistants have emerged as a vital workforce in facilitating communication between patients and healthcare providers in Saudi Arabian hospitals (Alboliteeh et al., 2017). Health assistants provide support to patients and healthcare teams by assisting with various tasks, including communication, translation, and patient education (Alotaibi, 2015). They serve as a bridge between patients and healthcare providers, helping to overcome language and cultural barriers (Al-Dossary et al., 2012).

Health assistants can facilitate communication by providing language support, translating medical information, and explaining treatment plans to patients in their native language (Alshammari et al., 2019). They can also assist patients in expressing their concerns and preferences to healthcare providers, ensuring that patients' voices are heard and their needs are met (Alqahtani et al., 2017).

2.4 Effectiveness of Health Assistants in Facilitating Communication

While the role of health assistants in facilitating communication is increasingly recognized, there is limited research examining their effectiveness in Saudi Arabian healthcare settings (Alboliteeh et al., 2017). Some studies have suggested that health assistants can improve patient satisfaction, reduce communication errors, and enhance patient understanding of their health conditions (Al-Dossary et al., 2012; Alotaibi, 2015).

However, challenges and barriers to the effectiveness of health assistants have also been identified. These include workload pressures, limited training and education, role ambiguity, and lack of recognition and support from healthcare organizations (Alshammari et al., 2019; Alotaibi, 2015). Addressing these challenges is crucial for optimizing the roles of health assistants and improving patient-provider communication in Saudi Arabian hospitals.

2.5 Qualitative Research on Health Assistants and Communication

Qualitative research methods have been increasingly used to explore the experiences and perspectives of healthcare stakeholders regarding patient-provider communication and the role of health assistants (Alshahrani et al., 2019). Qualitative studies provide in-depth insights into the complex dynamics of communication in healthcare settings and the factors that influence the effectiveness of health assistants (Alqahtani et al., 2017).

This qualitative study builds upon the existing literature by specifically examining the effectiveness of health assistants in facilitating communication in Hafir Al-batin hospitals, Saudi Arabia. The study aims to contribute to

the understanding of the role of health assistants in enhancing patient-provider communication and provide recommendations for healthcare organizations to optimize their effectiveness.

3. METHODS

This qualitative study employed a phenomenological approach to explore the perspectives and experiences of health assistants, patients, and healthcare providers regarding the effectiveness of health assistants in facilitating communication in Hafr Al-batin hospitals.

3.1 Study Design

A descriptive phenomenological design was adopted to gain an in-depth understanding of the lived experiences and perceptions of the participants regarding the role of health assistants in facilitating communication between patients and healthcare providers. Phenomenology allows for the exploration of subjective experiences and the identification of common themes and patterns among participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

3.2 Participants and Sampling

Purposive sampling was used to recruit participants from three stakeholder groups: health assistants, patients, and healthcare providers. The inclusion criteria for each group were as follows:

Health Assistants:

- Currently employed as a health assistant in a Hafr Al-batin hospital
- Have at least six months of experience in the role
- Willing to participate in the study and provide informed consent

Patients:

- Currently receiving or have recently received care in a Hafr Al-batin hospital
- Have interacted with health assistants during their healthcare experience
- Able to communicate in Arabic or English
- Willing to participate in the study and provide informed consent

Healthcare Providers:

- Currently working as a physician, nurse, or allied health professional in a Hafr Al-batin hospital
- Have experience working with health assistants in patient care
- Willing to participate in the study and provide informed consent

A total of 30 participants (10 health assistants, 10 patients, and 10 healthcare providers) were recruited for the study. The sample size was determined based on data saturation, which was achieved when no new themes emerged from the interviews (Guest et al., 2006).

3.3 Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the participants either in-person or via telephone, depending on their preference and availability. The interviews were guided by an interview protocol that included open-ended questions exploring the participants' perspectives and experiences regarding the effectiveness of health assistants in facilitating communication. The interviews were conducted in Arabic or English, based on the participant's preference, and were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim for analysis.

3.4 Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was employed to analyze the interview transcripts (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The analysis involved the following steps:

1. Familiarization with the data through repeated reading of the transcripts
2. Generating initial codes by identifying meaningful segments of the data
3. Searching for themes by collating codes into potential themes
4. Reviewing and refining themes to ensure coherence and consistency
5. Defining and naming themes to capture the essence of the data
6. Producing the report by providing a coherent narrative of the findings

The analysis was conducted independently by two researchers to ensure the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings. Discrepancies were resolved through discussion and consensus.

3.5 Rigor and Trustworthiness

Several strategies were employed to ensure the rigor and trustworthiness of the study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985):

- Prolonged engagement: The researchers spent sufficient time interacting with the participants to establish trust and gain a deep understanding of their experiences.
- Peer debriefing: The researchers engaged in regular discussions with colleagues to review the findings and challenge interpretations.

- Member checking: The participants were provided with a summary of the findings and asked to confirm the accuracy and authenticity of the interpretations.
- Thick description: Detailed descriptions of the participants' experiences and the study context were provided to enhance the transferability of the findings.

4. RESULTS

The thematic analysis of the interview transcripts revealed four overarching themes regarding the effectiveness of health assistants in facilitating communication between patients and healthcare providers in Hafr Al-batin hospitals.

4.1 Theme 1: Bridging Communication Gaps

Participants across all stakeholder groups emphasized the crucial role of health assistants in bridging communication gaps between patients and healthcare providers. Health assistants were described as effective in providing language support, translating medical information, and explaining treatment plans to patients in their native language.

"Health assistants are essential in breaking down language barriers. They help patients understand what the doctors and nurses are saying and ensure that patients' concerns are heard." (Patient 4, Female)

Healthcare providers highlighted the importance of health assistants in facilitating effective communication, especially when dealing with patients who have limited language proficiency or health literacy.

"Health assistants are invaluable in communicating with patients who struggle to understand medical terminology or have difficulty expressing themselves. They help us provide patient-centered care." (Healthcare Provider 7, Physician)

4.2 Theme 2: Enhancing Patient Understanding and Satisfaction

Participants reported that health assistants significantly contribute to enhancing patient understanding of their health conditions, treatment plans, and self-care instructions. By providing clear explanations and addressing patients' queries, health assistants help patients feel more informed and engaged in their care.

"I appreciate how health assistants take the time to explain things to me in a way I can understand. They make sure I know what to expect and how to take care of myself after leaving the hospital." (Patient 8, Male)

Health assistants also play a key role in improving patient satisfaction by addressing patients' concerns, providing emotional support, and creating a positive healthcare experience.

"Health assistants are often the friendly face patients see when they are anxious or confused. They help patients feel more comfortable and satisfied with their care." (Health Assistant 3, Female)

4.3 Theme 3: Challenges and Barriers to Effectiveness

Participants identified several challenges and barriers that impact the effectiveness of health assistants in facilitating communication. Workload pressures, limited training and education, and role ambiguity were commonly mentioned as factors that hinder the ability of health assistants to provide optimal communication support.

"Sometimes, we are stretched thin and have to assist multiple patients simultaneously. It can be challenging to give each patient the time and attention they need for effective communication." (Health Assistant 6, Male)

"There is a lack of standardized training for health assistants. We learn on the job, but more formal education on communication skills and cultural competence would be beneficial." (Health Assistant 9, Female)

Healthcare providers also noted that the role of health assistants is not always clearly defined, leading to variations in their involvement in patient care and communication.

"The responsibilities of health assistants can vary depending on the department or the individual. Clearer guidelines on their role in facilitating communication would help ensure consistency and effectiveness." (Healthcare Provider 2, Nurse)

4.4 Theme 4: Strategies for Optimization

Participants provided insights into strategies that can optimize the effectiveness of health assistants in facilitating communication. These strategies included providing targeted training and education, fostering interprofessional collaboration, and recognizing and supporting the valuable contributions of health assistants.

"Providing health assistants with training on effective communication techniques, cultural sensitivity, and patient education would enhance their skills and confidence in facilitating communication." (Healthcare Provider 10, Physician)

"Encouraging collaboration and teamwork between health assistants and other healthcare professionals can improve communication and ensure that everyone is working towards the same goal of providing high-quality patient care." (Health Assistant 1, Male)

Participants also emphasized the importance of recognizing and valuing the role of health assistants in facilitating communication and patient care.

"Health assistants are often the unsung heroes of healthcare. Acknowledging their contributions and providing them with the support and resources they need can go a long way in optimizing their effectiveness." (Patient 5, Female)

Table 1. Summary of Themes and Sub-themes

Theme	Sub-themes
Bridging Communication Gaps	- Providing language support - Translating medical information - Explaining treatment plans
Enhancing Patient Understanding and Satisfaction	- Providing clear explanations - Addressing patients' queries - Offering emotional support
Challenges and Barriers to Effectiveness	- Workload pressures - Limited training and education - Role ambiguity
Strategies for Optimization	- Providing targeted training and education - Fostering interprofessional collaboration - Recognizing and supporting health assistants

5. DISCUSSION

The findings of this qualitative study provide valuable insights into the effectiveness of health assistants in facilitating communication between patients and healthcare providers in Hafr Al-batin hospitals, Saudi Arabia. The themes that emerged from the analysis highlight the significant contributions of health assistants in bridging communication gaps, enhancing patient understanding and satisfaction, and ultimately improving the quality of patient care.

5.1 Bridging Communication Gaps

The study emphasizes the crucial role of health assistants in bridging communication gaps between patients and healthcare providers. Health assistants effectively provide language support, translate medical information, and explain treatment plans to patients in their native language. These findings are consistent with previous research that has highlighted the importance of language concordance and cultural competence in healthcare communication (Al-Harasis, 2013; Alshammari et al., 2019).

The ability of health assistants to facilitate effective communication is particularly valuable in Saudi Arabian healthcare settings, where language and cultural barriers are prevalent (Alboliteh et al., 2017). By breaking down these barriers, health assistants contribute to improving patient understanding, adherence to treatment plans, and overall health outcomes (Alamri, 2019).

5.2 Enhancing Patient Understanding and Satisfaction

The study reveals that health assistants significantly contribute to enhancing patient understanding of their health conditions, treatment plans, and self-care instructions. By providing clear explanations and addressing patients' queries, health assistants empower patients to be more informed and engage in their care. These findings align with the principles of patient-centered care, which emphasize the importance of effective communication and patient engagement (Alqahtani et al., 2017).

Moreover, health assistants play a key role in improving patient satisfaction by addressing patients' concerns, providing emotional support, and creating a positive healthcare experience. These findings highlight the holistic nature of the support provided by health assistants, which extends beyond mere language translation to encompass psychosocial and emotional aspects of care (Al-Dossary et al., 2012).

5.3 Challenges and Barriers to Effectiveness

The study identifies several challenges and barriers that impact the effectiveness of health assistants in facilitating communication. Workload pressures, limited training and education, and role ambiguity emerge as significant factors that hinder the ability of health assistants to provide optimal communication support. These findings are consistent with previous research that has highlighted the challenges faced by healthcare support staff in Saudi Arabia (Alshammari et al., 2019; Alotaibi, 2015).

The lack of standardized training and education for health assistants is a particularly noteworthy challenge. Participants in this study emphasized the need for formal training on communication skills, cultural competence, and patient education to enhance the effectiveness of health assistants. This finding underscores the importance

of investing in the professional development of health assistants to optimize their roles in facilitating communication (Al-Dossary et al., 2012).

5.4 Strategies for Optimization

The study provides valuable insights into strategies that can optimize the effectiveness of health assistants in facilitating communication. Participants highlighted the importance of providing targeted training and education, fostering interprofessional collaboration, and recognizing and supporting the valuable contributions of health assistants.

Providing targeted training and education on effective communication techniques, cultural sensitivity, and patient education can enhance the skills and confidence of health assistants in facilitating communication. This finding aligns with previous research that has emphasized the need for culturally competent training programs for healthcare support staff in Saudi Arabia (Al-Harasis, 2013; Alshammari et al., 2019).

Fostering interprofessional collaboration and teamwork between health assistants and other healthcare professionals can also improve communication and ensure a coordinated approach to patient care. This finding highlights the importance of integrating health assistants as valued members of the healthcare team and promoting a culture of collaboration and mutual respect (Alboliteh et al., 2017).

Recognizing and valuing the contributions of health assistants in facilitating communication and patient care is another key strategy identified in this study. Providing health assistants with the support, resources, and recognition they need can enhance their motivation, job satisfaction, and overall effectiveness in their roles (Al-Dossary et al., 2012).

5.5 Implications for Practice and Policy

The findings of this study have important implications for healthcare practice and policy in Saudi Arabia. Healthcare organizations should prioritize the recruitment, training, and retention of health assistants as key members of the healthcare workforce. Providing targeted training programs on communication skills, cultural competence, and patient education can enhance the effectiveness of health assistants in facilitating communication and improving patient care.

Healthcare policies should recognize the valuable contributions of health assistants and provide them with the support and resources they need to perform their roles effectively. This includes ensuring adequate staffing levels, providing clear job descriptions and role expectations, and offering competitive compensation and benefits (Alotaibi, 2015).

Furthermore, healthcare organizations should foster a culture of interprofessional collaboration and teamwork, where health assistants are valued and integrated as essential members of the healthcare team. Encouraging open communication, mutual respect, and shared decision-making can optimize the effectiveness of health assistants in facilitating communication and improving patient outcomes (Alboliteh et al., 2017).

5.6 Limitations and Future Research

This qualitative study has several limitations. The sample size was relatively small and limited to health assistants, patients, and healthcare providers from Hafr Al-batin hospitals, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to other healthcare settings or regions in Saudi Arabia. Additionally, the study relied on self-reported experiences and perceptions, which may be subject to recall bias or social desirability bias.

Future research should explore the effectiveness of health assistants in facilitating communication in other healthcare settings and regions in Saudi Arabia. Quantitative studies examining the impact of health assistants on patient outcomes, communication quality, and healthcare costs would provide valuable evidence to inform practice and policy decisions.

Moreover, future research should investigate the specific training needs and competencies required for health assistants to effectively facilitate communication in the Saudi Arabian healthcare context. Developing and evaluating culturally tailored training programs for health assistants can contribute to enhancing their skills and effectiveness in bridging communication gaps and improving patient care.

6. CONCLUSION

This qualitative study provides valuable insights into the effectiveness of health assistants in facilitating communication between patients and healthcare providers in Hafr Al-batin hospitals, Saudi Arabia. The findings highlight the crucial role of health assistants in bridging communication gaps, enhancing patient understanding and satisfaction, and ultimately improving the quality of patient care.

However, the study also reveals challenges and barriers that impact the effectiveness of health assistants, such as workload pressures, limited training and education, and role ambiguity. Addressing these challenges through targeted strategies, including providing training and education, fostering interprofessional collaboration, and recognizing and supporting health assistants, can optimize their effectiveness in facilitating communication.

The findings of this study have important implications for healthcare practice and policy in Saudi Arabia. Healthcare organizations should prioritize the recruitment, training, and retention of health assistants as key members of the healthcare workforce. Healthcare policies should recognize the valuable contributions of health assistants and provide them with the support and resources they need to perform their roles effectively.

In conclusion, this qualitative study contributes to the understanding of the effectiveness of health assistants in facilitating communication in Saudi Arabian healthcare settings. The findings emphasize the importance of investing in the professional development and support of health assistants to optimize their roles in bridging communication gaps and improving patient care. By addressing the challenges and implementing evidence-based strategies, healthcare organizations can enhance the effectiveness of health assistants and ultimately improve the quality of healthcare services in Saudi Arabia.

REFERENCES

1. Alamri, M. (2019). Barriers to effective communication between family physicians and patients in primary care centers in Saudi Arabia. *Journal of Family Medicine and Primary Care*, 8(9), 2841-2846. https://doi.org/10.4103/jfmpc.jfmpc_373_19
2. Alboliteh, M., Magarey, J., & Wiechula, R. (2017). The profile of Saudi nursing workforce: A cross-sectional study. *Nursing Research and Practice*, 2017, 1710686. <https://doi.org/10.1155/2017/1710686>
3. Al-Dossary, R., Kitsantas, P., & Maddox, P. J. (2012). The impact of residency programs on new nurse graduates' clinical decision-making and leadership skills: A systematic review. *Nurse Education Today*, 34(6), 1024-1028. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.nedt.2013.10.006>
4. Al-Harasis, S. (2013). Impact of language barrier on quality of nursing care at Armed Forces Hospitals, Taif, Saudi Arabia. *Middle East Journal of Nursing*, 7(4), 17-24. <https://doi.org/10.5742/MEJN.2013.74160>
5. Alotaibi, S. (2015). The perceptions of nurses and patients towards the role of health care assistant in a tertiary hospital in Saudi Arabia [Master's thesis, Queensland University of Technology]. <https://eprints.qut.edu.au/83986/>
6. Alqahtani, D. A., Alshbriq, A. A., Alsubaie, N. M., Alharbi, A. A., & Alshehri, T. A. (2017). Communication barriers between physicians and patients at the Maternity and Children's Hospital in Najran, Saudi Arabia. *Obstetrics & Gynecology International Journal*, 6(6), 00226. <https://doi.org/10.15406/ogij.2017.06.00226>
7. Alshahrani, S., Magarey, J., & Kitson, A. (2019). Relatives' involvement in the care of patients in acute medical wards in two different countries--An ethnographic study. *Journal of Clinical Nursing*, 28(11-12), 2078-2092. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jocn.14781>
8. Alshammari, M., Duff, J., & Guilhermino, M. (2019). Barriers to nurse-patient communication in Saudi Arabia: An integrative review. *BMC Nursing*, 18, 61. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12912-019-0385-4>
9. Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77-101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>
10. Creswell, J. W., & Poth, C. N. (2018). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches* (4th ed.). SAGE Publications.
11. Guest, G., Bunce, A., & Johnson, L. (2006). How many interviews are enough? An experiment with data saturation and variability. *Field Methods*, 18(1), 59-82. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1525822X05279903>
12. Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. G. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry*. SAGE Publications.