

Interprofessional Health Care Teams

What is a team?

Teams and teamwork are buzzwords in today's organizations. We often bring together a group of health providers from different professions and assume that they are a team. But a true team must develop over time. The following discussion presents a definition of an effective team, the developmental phases that teams progress through, and the key areas that teams must address to be effective.

Characteristics of Effective Interprofessional Health Care Teams

A team may be defined as a small number of people with complementary skills who are committed to a common purpose, performance goals and approach for which they hold themselves mutually accountable¹. Effective interprofessional health care teams may be characterized by the following:

- members provide care to a common group of patient/clients;
- members develop common goals for patient/client outcomes and work toward those goals;
- appropriate roles and functions are assigned to each member, and each member understands the roles of the other members;
- the team possesses a mechanism for sharing information; and
- the team possesses a mechanism to oversee the carrying out of plans, to assess outcomes, and to make adjustments based on the results of those outcomes.

Key principles of effective interprofessional health care teamwork include the following²:

- focus of members should be on needs of the patient/client rather than on individual contributions of members;
- the basis of primary health care is communication with patient/client, a central principle shared by all health professionals;
- collaboration requires both depending on others and contributing one's own ideas toward solving a common problem;
- team members must respect, understand roles, and recognize contributions of their members;
- teams work both within and between organizations; and
- individuals may have naïve expectations of other team members which can lead to role ambiguity, role conflict, and role overload.

The factors which can influence interprofessional teamwork in health care settings and organizations vary. They can include:

- individual factors (i.e., the skills of the people involved, the behaviours they model, the extent to which they believe in interdisciplinary teams, etc.);
- team (i.e., the stage of the team's development, the goals they set, etc.);

- organizational (i.e., the extent that the organization is supporting teams and their development); and
- systemic (i.e., the extent that the external environment represented by the healthcare system supports the changes the team is proposing).

Circumstances that favour the formation of interprofessional teams³:

- the problems are complex enough to require more than one set of skills or knowledge;
- the amount of skills or knowledge is too great for one provider;
- assembling a group of professionals will enhance the solution to the problems;
- team-members can communicate on an equal basis; and
- all providers are willing to sacrifice some professional autonomy in working together for a common goal.

Advantages of interprofessional team care⁴:

for patient/clients

- improves care by increasing the coordination of services;
- integrates health care for a wide range of health needs;
- empowers patient/clients as active partners in care;
- can be oriented to serving patients of diverse cultural backgrounds; and
- more efficient use of time.

for providers

- increases professional satisfaction due to clearer, more consistent goals of care;
- facilitates shift in emphasis from acute, episodic care to long-term preventive care and chronic illness management;
- the collaborative experience enables the provider to learn new skills and approaches to care;
- provides an environment for innovation; and
- allows providers to focus on individual areas of expertise.

for educators and students

- offers multiple health care paradigms to study;
- fosters appreciation and understanding of other disciplines;
- models strategies for future practice;
- promotes student participation; and
- challenges norms and values of each discipline.

for health delivery system

- potential for more efficient delivery of care;
- maximizes resources and facilities;

- decreases burden on acute care facilities as a result of increased prevention and patient education interventions.

Limitations of interprofessional team care⁵:

- the process of team formation is time consuming and requires matching of schedules of the different team members;
- collaboration requires communication between team members, which takes time away from patient appointments in busy practices;
- a comprehensive approach to health care may lead to increased use of limited services and resources; and
- a successful team requires on-going conflict resolution and goal re-assessment; failure of these tasks may impair health care delivery;

¹Katzenbach, J. R., & Smith, D. K. (1994). The Wisdom of Teams. New York: HarperCollins. (pp. 45)

²Grant RW, Finnocchio LJ, and the California Primary Care Consortium Subcommittee on Interdisciplinary Collaboration. (1995). Interdisciplinary Collaborative Teams in Primary Care: A Model Curriculum and Resource Guide. San Francisco, CA: Pew Health Professions Commission, 1995.

³Grant et al. (1995)

⁴Grant et al. (1995)

⁵Grant et al. (1995)