

Managing chronic disease: teamwork in general practice

FINDINGS FROM THE PRACTICE CAPACITY RESEARCH PROJECT*

Quality primary health care depends on practice staff working together effectively as a team. A growing body of research shows teamwork is especially important in caring for patients with chronic diseases such as asthma and diabetes, where management is more complex and involves the coordination of various providers and administrative processes.

Within a general practice, a well-organised cohesive team allows chronic disease management (CDM) tasks to be allocated among staff members in a way that best uses the skills of each. Practice nurses, practice managers and administrative staff can perform important organisational roles, such as setting up and managing disease-specific patient registers and recall/reminder systems to ensure that patients receive regular review (Table 1). The Chronic Care model, which is gaining influence worldwide, relies on nurses providing patients with the information and skills they need to manage their condition, while doctors perform clinical roles.^{1,2}

Health system policies and financial mechanisms are moving towards encouraging teamwork within general practice, particularly in the delivery of care for patients with chronic disease. Accordingly, the discipline of practice nursing is growing as CDM expands. However, team processes have not been assessed in Australian general practices.

One objective of the Practice Capacity research project was to identify characteristics of Australian general practices that are associated with better team climate in chronic disease care, and to measure the impact of team climate on patient care and staff job satisfaction.

Teamwork and its relationship to other aspects of practice was assessed using a series of surveys and an interview. Practice teams participated in the Team Climate Inventory,³ and the Overall Job Satisfaction Scale customised for general practices.⁸ The Team Climate Inventory includes

Table 1. Opportunities for teamwork

Tasks effectively carried out by administrative staff within general practice include the following important contributors to quality chronic disease care:

- Maintaining register and recall systems
- Ordering patient education materials
- Arranging patient follow-up
- Liaising with other health providers for referrals, co-ordination of care
- Organising case conferences/health assessments
- Establishing and managing a flexible appointment system, to ensure that patients with chronic diseases can readily access clinical staff when required
- Maintaining directories of services.

BACKGROUND TO THIS RESEARCH

- Research investigating a range of organisations has found that effective teams have clearly defined shared goals, decision-making processes that encourage members to participate, an emphasis on quality and achievement of tasks, and support for innovation.³
- In any healthcare setting, teamwork also depends on good communication, the team's ability to manage problems and resolve conflicts, effective leadership and coordination of work activities.^{4,5}
- Characteristics of an effective primary care team include:^{6,7}
 - the presence of a leader who creates interdependency among all members
 - a shared sense of responsibility for the team's performance
 - a common purpose
 - a climate of cooperation, trust and cohesion between team members
 - a focus on the future, where change is seen as an opportunity for improvement
 - a shared focus on the team's work and results
 - use of all team members' skills, abilities and training
 - a clear understanding of each other's roles.

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A large cross-sectional study was recently undertaken in general practices across Australia to investigate organisational systems that support chronic disease management. Participants included 247 GPs, 403 practice staff and 7,505 patients.

For an overview of the study design and findings, see *Managing chronic disease: what makes a general practice effective?* (available at www.cgpis.unsw.edu.au/practice_capacity.htm).

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questions designed to assess members' views on **team vision** (the clarity, sharedness, attainability and value of team objectives), **participant 'safety'** (influences on decision making, information sharing, interaction between members, support and sense of security to try new ideas), **task orientation** (the team's emphasis on monitoring quality of work, providing practical ideas and help, how weaknesses are appraised), and **support for innovation** (both expressed support and practical help).

GPs and other practice staff members answered the questionnaire individually, and scores were combined into a team score for the practice. The principal GP and practice manager in each practice also completed an interview about staff roles and teamwork. Statistical methods were used to test whether there was consensus between members of each practice. Findings were then correlated with measures of quality of chronic disease care and patients' assessment of care received.

Does teamwork affect quality of care?

Aspects of team working were among those components of practice organisation found to be most strongly associated with the provision of high-quality evidence-based chronic disease care:

- Systems for training staff and monitoring their performance
- Involvement of administrative staff in systems that support clinical care (e.g. maintaining register/recall systems, organising case conferences/health assessments, ordering patient education materials, liaising with other health providers for referrals, maintaining service directories).

Patients expressed greater overall satisfaction with practices that scored well for team climate among staff. Practices with good team climate were also rated higher by patients on quality of receptionist services.

What conditions foster a good team climate?

There was no difference in team climate between practices in metropolitan locations and those in regional/rural areas.

Team climate was negatively correlated with the total number of staff, particularly the number of non-clinical staff, but the number of GPs in the practice did not adversely affect team climate. Bigger practices were associated with lower scores for team vision, participant safety and support for innovation. However, the size of the team did not influence quality monitoring and application to the task (task orientation).

A possible interpretation is that, in some practices, communication between clinical and non-clinical staff is more difficult where there is a large number of non-clinical staff members. In large practices, separate subcultures might develop among administrative and clinical staff.

Implications for practice

As expected, team climate was strongly associated with job satisfaction for GPs and staff.

These findings suggest that it is important to strengthen teamwork within practices, by focussing on initiatives that build team vision, participative safety, task orientation and support for innovation. Such initiatives can be incorporated into quality improvement and practice support programs, reinforced through practice accreditation programs, emphasised in GP

PRACTICE STAFF PARTICIPATING IN THIS SURVEY

- Of 97 practices participating in the larger study, 65% were in metropolitan areas, 87% were RACGP-accredited.
- The study included solo GPs (26%), medium-size practices (2–3 GPs; 33%) and large (≥ 4 GPs; 41%).
- Questionnaires were completed by 654 practice members from 94 practices.
- Participants included GPs (40%), practice nurses (13%), practice manager (8%) and receptionists (38%).

training programs and supported by policies and incentives encouraging teamwork.

More attention to team climate and processes may be needed in general practices with large non-clinical staff.

References

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The practice capacity research project found that:

- Involvement of administrative staff in management of register/recall systems, and other processes to support clinical care, was linked with high quality clinical care.
- Practices with better team climate had fewer non-clinical staff.
- Patients expressed greater satisfaction with practices that scored well for team climate among staff. Practices with good team climate were also rated higher for patients on quality of receptionist services.
- Good team climate is associated with higher job satisfaction for GPs and staff.