The Impact of Effective Nurse-Laboratory specialist Communicating on Managing Critical Lab Values in Tertiary Care

Hiyam S. Almotery[1], Sara H. Alharithy[2], Nouf M. Alshayea[3], Shahad H. Almaqary[4], Ahmad A. Alsenaidy[5]

Health Affairs at the Ministry of National Guard

Abstract

Effective communication between nurses and laboratory specialists is crucial for managing critical lab values in a tertiary care setting. This mixed-methods study aimed to understand how communication efficiency impacts the timely management of critical lab results. The quantitative analysis of 200 cases showed an average turnaround time of 45 minutes, with shorter times linked to better patient outcomes. Additionally, interviews with 15 nurses and 10 lab specialists uncovered themes around communication tools, collaboration, barriers, and potential improvements. The findings highlight the importance of structured communication, teamwork, and improved technology in reducing delays and ensuring timely medical interventions. Addressing workflow disruptions and tech challenges could further enhance patient safety and care quality.

Keywords: Communication, Critical Lab Values, Nurse-Laboratory Collaboration, Tertiary Care, Patient Outcomes, Healthcare Communication

Introduction

Good communication between healthcare professionals is essential for quality patient care, especially in the complex environment of tertiary hospitals. One key aspect of this communication is quickly sharing lab results, particularly when these results indicate urgent medical intervention (Chadwick et al., 2019). Critical lab values can point to life-threatening conditions that require immediate action and coordination between nurses and lab specialists. The efficiency of this process significantly affects patient outcomes, making the collaboration between these two groups crucial (Friedman and Berger,2004).

Nurses are often the direct link between lab results and patient care. They monitor patients, administer treatments, and respond to abnormal lab results (Benner et al., 2009). Laboratory specialists ensure that these results are accurate and delivered on time. Effective communication between these roles is essential so that critical information reaches the right person promptly and appropriate action can be taken without delay (Chadwick et al., 2019).

Despite the need for effective communication, breakdowns, workflow disruptions, and delays in sharing critical values are common (Friedman and Berger, 2004). Such issues can lead to poor outcomes, including delays in diagnosis and treatment. Understanding how nurse-laboratory specialist communication affects the management of critical lab values is vital to identify strategies that can enhance patient safety, reduce delays, and improve healthcare quality overall. This study aims to explore how communication between

nurses and lab specialists impacts the management of critical lab values, highlighting the importance of timely clinical responses in a tertiary care setting.

Literature Review

Effective communication in healthcare is widely recognized as key to patient safety and quality care. Miscommunication or delays among healthcare professionals have been linked to increased patient risks, including higher morbidity and mortality (Gordon & Findley, 2011). In tertiary hospitals, where cases are often more complex, good communication is even more important, especially when managing critical lab values that need immediate attention (Starmer et al., 2014).

Several studies have shown how timely lab result reporting improves patient outcomes. Chadwick et al. (2019) emphasized the importance of having clear protocols for communicating abnormal lab findings. They argued that having a well-structured reporting system helps ensure that necessary interventions are made quickly, reducing the risk of negative outcomes. Laboratory specialists play a key role in providing accurate and prompt lab results, which is crucial for effective patient care (Chadwick et al., 2019).

The role of nurses in managing critical lab values is also crucial. Nurses are typically the first to receive and act on lab results, making their response time critical to patient outcomes (Benner et al., 2009). A study by Friedman and Berger (2004) found that efficient communication between nurses and lab specialists can prevent delays and improve patient care. Nurses' ability to interpret lab results and initiate necessary actions is largely dependent on effective communication (Friedman and Berger, 2004).

Starmer et al. (2014) highlighted the value of structured communication tools like SBAR (Situation, Background, Assessment, Recommendation) for improving information sharing among healthcare providers. Their research showed that using standardized communication methods can significantly reduce errors and improve teamwork between nurses and lab staff, especially when managing critical lab values that need urgent responses.

Barriers like unclear reporting procedures, inconsistent protocols, and heavy workloads can prevent efficient management of critical lab results (Groves et al., 2011). Groves and colleagues pointed out that without streamlined communication pathways, critical information may not reach the right healthcare provider in time, negatively impacting patient outcomes. They suggested that training programs focused on interprofessional communication could help bridge these gaps and foster better teamwork between nurses and lab specialists.

Health information technology (HIT) has also shown promise in improving communication between healthcare professionals. Tools like electronic health records (EHR) and laboratory information systems (LIS) can make the process faster and more accurate, reducing the chance of miscommunication (Hicks et al., 2014). Khanna and Yen argued that HIT supports clinical decision-making by giving nurses real-time access to lab data, allowing them to respond promptly when critical values are reported.

The literature clearly shows that effective nurse-laboratory communication is essential for managing critical lab values. Efficient communication ensures timely intervention, enhances teamwork, and ultimately leads to better patient outcomes. However, barriers like heavy workloads and insufficient training can still hinder communication. Addressing these barriers through training programs and improved technology could significantly improve the management of critical lab values in tertiary settings.

Methodology

This study used a mixed-methods approach to explore how communication between nurses and lab specialists affects the management of critical lab values in a tertiary care setting. Data collection took place over six months in a tertiary hospital.

Study Design

A mixed-methods design was chosen to provide both quantitative and qualitative insights into nurse-lab specialist communication. The quantitative component analyzed data on turnaround times for critical lab values, while the qualitative component included interviews with nurses and lab specialists to understand their experiences and perspectives.

Quantitative Data Collection

For the quantitative component, data on critical lab value reporting and response times were collected from the hospital's EHR system. The data included timestamps for lab result generation, reporting, and the corresponding clinical actions taken by the nursing staff. In total, 200 cases involving critical lab values were reviewed to assess communication efficiency and its impact on patient outcomes.

Qualitative Data Collection

Qualitative data were gathered through semi-structured interviews with 15 nurses and 10 lab specialists. Participants were selected to ensure a diverse representation of staff with varying experience levels. Interviews focused on participants' experiences with communication during critical lab value reporting, challenges faced, and suggestions for improvement. The interviews were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed using thematic analysis to identify key themes related to communication effectiveness and barriers.

Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics to determine the average turnaround time for critical lab values and the frequency of delays. Correlation analysis was used to assess the relationship between communication efficiency and patient outcomes, particularly the timeliness of clinical interventions.

Qualitative data were analyzed using thematic analysis, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step approach. Themes were identified based on patterns in participants' responses, focusing on factors that helped or hindered effective communication between nurses and lab specialists.

Ethical Considerations

The study received ethical approval from the ethics committee. All participants provided informed consent, and their responses were anonymized to protect their identities.

Results

Quantitative Findings

The quantitative analysis showed an average turnaround time of 45 minutes for critical lab values, with a standard deviation of 15 minutes. Approximately 20% of cases experienced delays longer than 60 minutes. Correlation analysis found a significant link between shorter turnaround times and improved patient outcomes, particularly regarding timely clinical interventions. The following table summarizes the average turnaround times for different types of critical lab values:

Lab Test Type	Average Turnaround Time (minutes)	Delays > 60 minutes (%)
Blood Glucose	40	15
Electrolytes	50	25
Coagulation Profile	47	18
Arterial Blood Gases	42	10

These findings indicate that efficient communication between nurses and lab specialists is essential for timely reporting and clinical response to critical lab values.

Qualitative Findings

Thematic analysis of the qualitative data revealed four main themes related to nurse-lab specialist communication:

Theme 1: Communication Tools and Protocols

- Sub-theme 1.1: Use of Structured Tools: Participants noted that standardized tools like SBAR helped facilitate effective communication.
  - Participant 4 (Nurse): "Using SBAR helps us organize the information clearly, which reduces misunderstandings when sharing critical lab values."

- Sub-theme 1.2: Lack of Uniformity: Inconsistent use of protocols often led to miscommunication.
  - Participant 9 (Lab Specialist): "Not everyone follows the same protocols, which sometimes results in delays or misunderstandings."

Theme 2: Interprofessional Collaboration

- Sub-theme 2.1: Mutual Respect and Teamwork: Positive teamwork was seen as a key factor in effective communication.
  - Participant 7 (Nurse): "Having a good relationship with lab staff makes it easier to get quick responses when critical values are reported."

- Sub-theme 2.2: Challenges in Collaboration: Heavy workloads often hindered effective collaboration.
  - Participant 12 (Lab Specialist): "Sometimes we are overwhelmed with requests, and it becomes challenging to prioritize them effectively."

Theme 3: Barriers to Effective Communication

- Sub-theme 3.1: Workflow Interruptions: Workflow interruptions were a major barrier.

- Participant 1 (Nurse): "There are times when I'm dealing with an emergency, and it's hard to follow up on lab results immediately."

- Sub-theme 3.2: Technological Limitations: Issues with the EHR system also hindered communication.
- Participant 15 (Lab Specialist): "Sometimes the system is slow, which delays the transmission of critical values."

Theme 4: Suggested Improvements
- Sub-theme 4.1: Training Programs: Participants suggested that joint training programs could enhance communication.
- Participant 6 (Nurse): "We need more training sessions together to understand each other's roles better."

- Sub-theme 4.2: Improved Technology: Upgrading the EHR system was recommended to reduce delays.
- Participant 11 (Lab Specialist): "Upgrading the EHR system could significantly cut down delays in reporting lab values."

Discussion

The findings from both the quantitative and qualitative analyses underscore the importance of effective communication between nurses and lab specialists in managing critical lab values. The quantitative data showed that shorter turnaround times were linked to better patient outcomes, highlighting the role of communication in preventing harmful delays. Faster turnaround times for critical tests like blood glucose and coagulation profiles significantly improved the timeliness of clinical interventions, contributing to better patient safety.

The qualitative analysis provided a deeper understanding of the factors that affect communication effectiveness. The use of structured communication tools, such as SBAR, was identified as a major facilitator in reducing miscommunication and improving clarity. However, inconsistent use of these protocols pointed to a need for more standardized practices across healthcare teams.

Interprofessional collaboration between nurses and lab specialists was also seen as crucial for managing critical lab values effectively. Participants emphasized that mutual respect and strong working relationships help facilitate timely responses. However, heavy workloads and inadequate prioritization often got in the way of effective teamwork. Improving collaboration through dedicated training and workload management could further boost communication efficiency.

Workflow interruptions and technological issues werealsohighlighted as significantbarriers. Emergencies oftendisrupted workflows, makingitdifficult for nurses to follow up on labresults in a timelymanner. Delays in the EHR system alsoadded to these challenges. Addressingthesebarriersthrough HIT upgrades and better workflow management couldsignificantlyimprove communication.

The suggested improvements—training programs and better EHR systems—offer practical solutions to the challenges identified. Training programs focusing on communication and role clarity could help bridge gaps between nurses and lab specialists, fostering better teamwork. Investing in technology to improve the speed and reliability of lab result transmission could further reduce delays and ensure that critical information is communicated promptly.

Overall, the findings emphasize the importance of both interpersonal and technological factors in ensuring effective communication between nurses and lab specialists. Addressing these barriers and implementing the suggested improvements can enhance the management of critical lab values, leading to better patient outcomes and higher-quality care. Future research could explore the impact of specific interventions, like standardized protocols or technology upgrades, on improving communication and reducing turnaround times in tertiary care settings.

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