

Internal communication within the healthcare system during the COVID-19 pandemic in Latvia

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Background:

Effective communication among health care providers is a key for responding to the rapidly changing health care needs, improving work efficiency, and ensuring patient safety, particularly during the crisis of the COVID-19 pandemic. This study explores the communication-related experiences of healthcare professionals during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic in Latvia.

Methods:

Semi-structured interviews with 7 chairmen of healthcare facilities, 19 general practitioners, and 15 specialists were conducted from September to December 2020. Interviews were recorded and transcribed. Thematic analysis revealed five themes related to internal communication among health care providers. The study was a component of the National research programme VPP-COVID-2020/1-0011.

Results:

The 1st theme, 'Initial chaos paralyzing the system', illustrated the disorderly format of delivering the information that created confusion and anxiety. The 2nd theme, 'Overwhelming amount of information', revealed the challenge to process new information received daily and from various sources. The 3rd theme, 'Decentralized decision-making' highlighted the lack of clearly communicated algorithms for specific patients' groups, leaving the decision-making to the health care providers. The 4th theme, 'Collegial support of the peers', emerged as a crucial coping mechanism and information channel, substituting for the lack of official information. The 5th theme, 'Opportunity for growth', consolidated suggestions from health care professionals for improving internal communication in future.

Conclusions:

Internal communication as experienced among healthcare professionals was overwhelming and insufficient at the same time. It created an environment promoting closer collaboration among different specialists and suggestions for necessary improvements.

Key messages:

- Understanding and perception of communication among health care providers in different healthcare system levels were central that affected the health care actions tackling the COVID-19 emergency.
- Effective communication within the healthcare system is critical during the pandemic. Messages should be clear, evidence-informed, and transparent for targeted action of the health care workforce.