

The Culture Of Supportive Healthcare Practice: Interprofessional Contributions Of Dental Assistants And Nursing Specialists In Saudi Clinical Settings

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Abstract

Supportive healthcare practice has increasingly been recognized as a fundamental component of quality, safety, and patient-centered care. Beyond its clinical and operational dimensions, supportive practice reflects a cultural system shaped by professional values, organizational norms, and interprofessional relationships. This narrative review explores the culture of supportive healthcare practice through an analytical examination of interprofessional contributions made by dental assistants and nursing specialists within Saudi clinical settings.

Drawing on international and Saudi-focused literature, the review synthesizes evidence on how organizational culture, professional hierarchy, and sociocultural norms influence collaboration, role recognition, and patient-centered outcomes. The findings highlight that dental assistants and nursing specialists play pivotal yet often underrecognized roles in care coordination, patient communication, emotional support, and quality enhancement. When these roles are supported through inclusive leadership, interprofessional education, and organizational recognition, supportive healthcare practice contributes significantly to improved patient experience, workforce well-being, and healthcare quality.

Within the Saudi context, cultural values such as collectivism, respect for authority, and institutional loyalty shape both opportunities and challenges for interprofessional support. The review concludes that embedding supportive healthcare practice into organizational culture—rather than treating it as an informal expectation—is essential for sustaining collaborative care and aligning healthcare delivery with national transformation goals. Cultural and organizational recommendations are proposed to strengthen interprofessional support and promote humane, ethical, and collaborative healthcare systems.

Keywords: Supportive healthcare practice; Healthcare culture; Interprofessional collaboration; Dental assistants; Nursing specialists; Patient-centered care; Organizational culture; Saudi Arabia; Narrative review

1. INTRODUCTION

Healthcare systems are not merely technical structures for disease management; rather, they represent complex cultural environments shaped by professional values, interpersonal relationships, and organizational norms. Within this context, the concept of *supportive healthcare practice* has gained increasing attention as a cornerstone of quality, safety, and patient-centered care. Supportive practice emphasizes collaboration, mutual respect, and shared responsibility among healthcare professionals, extending beyond clinical outcomes to encompass ethical, cultural, and social dimensions of care (Hall & Weaver, 2001; WHO, 2010).

In Saudi Arabia, the rapid expansion of healthcare services and the ongoing transformation aligned with Vision 2030 have highlighted the importance of interprofessional collaboration in achieving sustainable and culturally responsive care. Dental assistants and nursing specialists, in particular, play pivotal yet often underexplored roles in shaping daily clinical interactions, patient experiences, and the overall culture of care within healthcare institutions. Despite their integral contributions, existing literature tends to focus predominantly on physicians, leaving a notable gap regarding supportive roles and their cultural significance within clinical settings (Almalki et al., 2017).

This narrative review aims to explore the culture of supportive healthcare practice through an analytical examination of interprofessional contributions made by dental assistants and nursing specialists in Saudi clinical settings. By synthesizing existing literature, the review seeks to highlight how these roles contribute to collaborative practice, organizational culture, and patient-centered values within the Saudi healthcare context.

2. Conceptual Framework: Supportive Healthcare Practice as a Cultural Construct

Supportive healthcare practice can be conceptualized as a culturally embedded system of behaviors, attitudes, and professional interactions that promote cooperation, trust, and shared accountability among healthcare workers. From a cultural perspective, healthcare institutions function as social systems in which norms, hierarchies, and communication patterns directly influence professional performance and patient outcomes (Schein, 2017). Interprofessional collaboration constitutes a core element of supportive practice. It involves multiple health professionals working cohesively, respecting each other's expertise, and engaging in joint decision-making processes to optimize care delivery (Reeves et al., 2018). Studies have consistently demonstrated that effective interprofessional collaboration enhances patient safety, improves care quality, and fosters a positive work environment (WHO, 2010).

In Saudi Arabia, cultural values such as collectivism, respect for authority, and strong interpersonal ties significantly shape healthcare practice. These values can both facilitate and challenge interprofessional collaboration, depending on how organizational structures and leadership styles support inclusive participation and professional recognition (Alshammari et al., 2021). Within this framework, supportive healthcare practice emerges not merely as a clinical necessity, but as a reflection of broader cultural dynamics influencing professional identity and teamwork.

3. Interprofessional Contributions of Dental Assistants and Nursing Specialists

Dental assistants and nursing specialists serve as critical pillars of supportive healthcare practice, contributing to both clinical efficiency and the cultural climate of healthcare organizations. Dental assistants play a vital role in facilitating patient flow, ensuring infection control, supporting dental procedures, and acting as a communication bridge between dentists and patients. Their close and continuous interaction with patients

positions them as key contributors to patient comfort, trust, and adherence to care instructions (Gurenlian, 2019).

Nursing specialists, on the other hand, extend their role beyond direct patient care to include care coordination, patient education, advocacy, and interdisciplinary communication. They often act as mediators within healthcare teams, ensuring continuity of care and aligning clinical decisions with patient needs and organizational policies (Bender et al., 2016). Their leadership in bedside care and patient engagement significantly influences the supportive culture within clinical environments.

When functioning collaboratively, dental assistants and nursing specialists contribute to a shared culture of support by reinforcing teamwork, reducing professional silos, and promoting holistic care. Evidence suggests that such interprofessional synergy enhances job satisfaction, minimizes workplace conflict, and strengthens organizational resilience (Reeves et al., 2018). In Saudi clinical settings, recognizing and empowering these roles is essential for cultivating a healthcare culture that values cooperation, respect, and shared professional purpose.

4. Supportive Healthcare Practice and Organizational Culture in Saudi Clinical Settings (Expanded)

Organizational culture constitutes the invisible framework through which healthcare practices are shaped, interpreted, and sustained. It encompasses shared values, professional norms, leadership styles, communication patterns, and implicit expectations that govern daily interactions within clinical environments. In the context of supportive healthcare practice, organizational culture determines whether collaboration, mutual respect, and interprofessional engagement are encouraged as collective values or constrained by rigid hierarchies and role boundaries (Schein, 2017).

In Saudi clinical settings, organizational culture is deeply influenced by sociocultural principles such as collectivism, respect for authority, role clarity, and institutional loyalty. These values can serve as powerful enablers of supportive practice when aligned with inclusive leadership and team-oriented policies. However, when misaligned, they may inadvertently reinforce professional silos and limit the visibility of supportive roles such as dental assistants and nursing specialists (AbuAlRub & Alghamdi, 2012; Almalki et al., 2017).

Supportive healthcare practice thrives in organizations that recognize all healthcare professionals as contributors to patient outcomes, regardless of formal authority or clinical seniority. Studies indicate that healthcare institutions with participatory leadership models, transparent communication systems, and recognition mechanisms demonstrate stronger interprofessional trust and higher levels of workforce engagement (Braithwaite et al., 2017). Within such cultures, dental assistants and nursing specialists are empowered to actively participate in care coordination, patient advocacy, and quality improvement initiatives.

Conversely, organizations characterized by strict hierarchical control and limited interdisciplinary dialogue may suppress supportive practices. In these environments, dental assistants and nursing specialists often experience role marginalization, reduced professional autonomy, and constrained opportunities for collaboration, which negatively affect morale and patient-centered care delivery (Alharbi et al., 2019). This dynamic highlights the critical role of organizational culture as either a facilitator or barrier to supportive healthcare practice.

From a cultural standpoint, Saudi healthcare institutions undergoing transformation under Vision 2030 face a strategic opportunity to redefine organizational norms. Embedding supportive healthcare practice into institutional culture—through policy reform, leadership

development, and interprofessional education—can enhance system resilience, care quality, and workforce sustainability.

Table 1. Key Organizational Culture Dimensions Influencing Supportive Healthcare Practice

Organizational Dimension	Description	Impact on Supportive Practice
Leadership Style	Degree of participatory vs. hierarchical leadership	Participatory leadership enhances collaboration and role recognition
Communication Norms	Openness of interprofessional dialogue	Open communication strengthens teamwork and trust
Role Recognition	Institutional acknowledgment of supportive roles	High recognition improves engagement and care coordination
Decision-Making Structures	Inclusion of multiple professions in decisions	Inclusive structures promote shared responsibility
Professional Development	Access to interprofessional training	Enhances mutual understanding and collaborative skills

This table illustrates how organizational culture dimensions directly shape supportive healthcare practice. Institutions that invest in participatory leadership, open communication, and professional development create environments conducive to interprofessional collaboration and shared accountability.

Table 2. Cultural Characteristics of Saudi Healthcare Organizations and Their Influence on Supportive Roles

Cultural Characteristic	Context in Saudi Healthcare	Implications for Dental Assistants & Nursing Specialists
Respect for Authority	Strong hierarchical respect	May limit upward communication if not balanced
Collectivism	Emphasis on group harmony	Facilitates teamwork when inclusivity is promoted
Role Formalization	Clearly defined professional roles	Provides clarity but may restrict flexibility
Institutional Loyalty	High commitment to organizations	Enhances stability and long-term engagement
Cultural Sensitivity	Alignment with social norms	Supports patient trust and culturally competent care

The table demonstrates that Saudi cultural characteristics are not inherently restrictive; rather, their impact on supportive roles depends on organizational interpretation. When integrated with inclusive policies, these cultural traits can strengthen supportive healthcare practice rather than hinder it.

Overall, organizational culture emerges as a central determinant of supportive healthcare practice in Saudi clinical settings. By recognizing dental assistants and nursing specialists as culturally and professionally integral to healthcare delivery, institutions can foster environments that support collaboration, ethical practice, and patient-centered values. Such cultural alignment is essential for advancing healthcare quality and sustaining workforce well-being within the evolving Saudi healthcare system.

5. Cultural and Professional Challenges to Interprofessional Support

Despite the growing recognition of supportive healthcare practice as a foundation for quality and patient-centered care, multiple cultural and professional challenges continue to constrain effective interprofessional support within clinical settings. These challenges are not merely operational but are deeply embedded in organizational culture, professional identity, and broader sociocultural norms. Understanding these barriers is essential for interpreting how supportive roles—particularly dental assistants and nursing specialists—are positioned and perceived within healthcare systems.

One of the most prominent challenges is **professional hierarchy**, which shapes authority, communication flow, and decision-making processes. In many healthcare organizations, clinical authority is traditionally concentrated among physicians, while supportive professions are positioned as secondary or auxiliary. This hierarchical ordering can limit the participation of dental assistants and nursing specialists in clinical discussions, care planning, and quality improvement initiatives, despite their close proximity to patients and detailed operational knowledge (Reeves et al., 2018). In the Saudi context, hierarchy is further reinforced by cultural norms emphasizing respect for seniority, formal authority, and clearly demarcated professional roles. While these norms promote order and accountability, they may inadvertently discourage open dialogue and interprofessional negotiation, particularly for professionals in supportive roles (Alharbi et al., 2019). When supportive staff perceive that their input is undervalued or unwelcome, collaboration becomes symbolic rather than functional.

Another significant barrier is **role ambiguity and limited professional recognition**. Dental assistants and nursing specialists often perform complex tasks that extend beyond their formal job descriptions, including patient education, emotional support, coordination of care, and informal mediation between professionals. However, when these contributions are not institutionally recognized or formally documented, they remain culturally invisible, leading to diminished professional identity and reduced motivation (Hall & Weaver, 2001). Additionally, limited interprofessional education and training restricts the development of collaborative competencies. Many healthcare professionals are educated within discipline-specific silos, with minimal exposure to shared learning or teamwork-based training. As a result, misconceptions about professional roles persist, reinforcing stereotypes and inhibiting mutual trust (WHO, 2010). In Saudi Arabia, although health education reform is underway, structured interprofessional education remains unevenly implemented across institutions.

Workload pressures and staffing shortages further exacerbate these challenges. High patient volumes and administrative demands often prioritize task completion over reflective collaboration, leaving little time for meaningful interprofessional interaction. Under such conditions, supportive practice becomes reactive rather than intentional, driven by necessity rather than shared cultural commitment (Braithwaite et al., 2017).

Table 3. Major Cultural and Professional Barriers to Supportive Healthcare Practice

Barrier	Description	Impact on Interprofessional Support
Professional Hierarchy	Unequal authority distribution among professions	Limits participation of supportive roles
Role Ambiguity	Unclear or undervalued role definitions	Reduces professional identity and engagement
Cultural Norms	Emphasis on seniority and formal authority	Restricts open communication

Limited Interprofessional Education	Discipline-based training models	Weakens collaborative competencies
Workload Pressure	High clinical and administrative demands	Reduces time for collaboration

This table highlights that barriers to supportive healthcare practice are multidimensional, combining structural, cultural, and educational factors. Addressing a single barrier in isolation is unlikely to produce sustainable improvement without broader cultural change.

Table 4. Specific Challenges Faced by Dental Assistants and Nursing Specialists

Professional Group	Key Challenges	Cultural Implications
Dental Assistants	Limited decision-making authority, task-based recognition	Perceived as technical support rather than care contributors
Nursing Specialists	Heavy workload, role expansion without authority	Risk of burnout and moral distress
Both Groups	Underrepresentation in leadership discussions	Marginalization within organizational culture

The challenges faced by dental assistants and nursing specialists reflect broader cultural patterns within healthcare organizations. Their marginal positioning is not a reflection of limited contribution but of cultural narratives that prioritize certain professions over others.

From a cultural perspective, these challenges underscore the tension between traditional professional hierarchies and contemporary healthcare demands that require collaboration, flexibility, and shared responsibility. For Saudi healthcare institutions, overcoming these barriers necessitates culturally sensitive interventions that respect established norms while gradually expanding professional inclusion.

Embedding supportive healthcare practice into organizational culture requires more than policy directives; it demands a shift in how professional value is defined and enacted. Recognizing dental assistants and nursing specialists as active contributors to care culture—rather than peripheral support—represents a critical step toward achieving interprofessional harmony and sustainable healthcare transformation.

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Embedding supportive healthcare practice into organizational culture requires more than policy directives; it demands a shift in how professional value is defined and enacted. Recognizing dental assistants and nursing specialists as active contributors to care culture—rather than peripheral support—represents a critical step toward achieving interprofessional harmony and sustainable healthcare transformation.

7. CONCLUSION AND CULTURAL RECOMMENDATIONS

This narrative review has highlighted that supportive healthcare practice is not merely a functional arrangement within clinical settings, but a deeply cultural phenomenon shaped by organizational values, professional identities, and sociocultural norms. Through examining interprofessional contributions of dental assistants and nursing specialists in Saudi clinical settings, the review demonstrates that these roles are integral to fostering collaborative environments, enhancing patient-centered care, and sustaining healthcare quality.

Dental assistants and nursing specialists occupy unique positions within healthcare systems, characterized by continuous patient interaction, operational coordination, and emotional support. Despite their critical contributions, these professionals often remain culturally underrecognized within hierarchical healthcare structures. The review findings suggest that when organizational culture marginalizes supportive roles, interprofessional collaboration becomes constrained, ultimately affecting patient experience and care outcomes. Conversely, healthcare environments that actively promote supportive practice—through inclusive leadership, role recognition, and interprofessional engagement—demonstrate stronger teamwork, higher staff satisfaction, and improved quality indicators (Braithwaite et al., 2017; Reeves et al., 2018).

Within the Saudi healthcare context, cultural values such as collectivism, respect for authority, and institutional loyalty can serve as powerful facilitators of supportive practice when aligned with inclusive organizational strategies. However, without deliberate cultural integration, these same values may reinforce professional silos and limit open communication. The ongoing healthcare transformation aligned with Vision 2030 presents a strategic opportunity to redefine professional culture by embedding supportive healthcare practice as a shared institutional value rather than an informal expectation.

From a cultural perspective, supportive healthcare practice should be reframed as a marker of professional ethics, social responsibility, and collective accountability. Recognizing dental assistants and nursing specialists as active contributors to care culture—rather than peripheral support—enhances professional dignity, strengthens interprofessional trust, and reinforces patient-centered values. Such cultural reframing is essential for achieving

sustainable healthcare systems that balance technical excellence with humane and culturally responsive care.

Table 7. Cultural and Organizational Recommendations to Strengthen Supportive Healthcare Practice

Recommendation Area	Proposed Strategy	Cultural and Professional Impact
Organizational Culture	Integrate supportive practice into institutional values and mission statements	Normalizes collaboration as a cultural norm
Leadership Development	Promote inclusive and participatory leadership models	Enhances role recognition and shared accountability
Role Recognition	Formal acknowledgment of dental assistants and nursing specialists in care planning	Strengthens professional identity and motivation
Interprofessional Education	Implement structured interprofessional training programs	Improves mutual understanding and teamwork
Policy and Governance	Include supportive roles in quality and safety committees	Expands participation in decision-making
Workforce Well-being	Address workload balance and provide psychosocial support	Reduces burnout and enhances retention
Cultural Sensitivity	Align supportive practice with Saudi sociocultural values	Enhances patient trust and culturally competent care

Analytical Commentary:

This table underscores that strengthening supportive healthcare practice requires multidimensional interventions targeting culture, leadership, education, and governance. Sustainable improvement is achieved not through isolated initiatives, but through coherent cultural alignment across organizational systems.

In conclusion, supportive healthcare practice represents a culturally grounded pathway for advancing interprofessional collaboration and patient-centered care in Saudi Arabia. By embracing dental assistants and nursing specialists as culturally and professionally integral to healthcare delivery, institutions can cultivate resilient care environments that reflect both national values and global best practices. Future research should continue to explore cultural mechanisms that shape professional interaction, with particular emphasis on supportive roles as drivers of humane, ethical, and collaborative healthcare systems.

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