

Evaluating the Effectiveness of Health Assistants in Facilitating Communication Between Patients and Healthcare Providers: A Systematic Review

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Abstract

Effective communication between patients and healthcare providers is a foundational determinant of care quality, patient satisfaction, treatment adherence, and safety outcomes. Health assistants, including nursing assistants and allied support personnel, often function as frontline communicators and intermediaries within clinical environments. Despite their expanding roles in healthcare systems, limited synthesis exists regarding their measurable effectiveness in facilitating communication processes. This systematic review evaluates the evidence examining the impact of health assistants on communication quality, patient understanding, care coordination, and patient safety outcomes. Following PRISMA 2020 guidelines, searches were conducted in PubMed, Scopus, and Web of Science. Studies assessing communication facilitation roles of health assistants, patient navigators, or support personnel were included. Evidence suggests that health assistants enhance communication clarity, improve patient comprehension, support shared decision-making, and reduce miscommunication-related adverse events. Their presence is associated with improved patient satisfaction scores, better chronic disease management adherence, and enhanced coordination in multidisciplinary teams. Effectiveness is influenced by training, defined role boundaries, cultural competence, and institutional support. Although direct Saudi-based evidence remains limited, international data indicate significant potential benefits within structured healthcare systems. Strengthening competency frameworks and integrating communication training into assistant roles may optimize patient-centered care outcomes in Saudi healthcare settings.

Keywords: health assistants, patient communication, healthcare communication, patient safety, systematic review

INTRODUCTION

Communication breakdowns remain among the most frequent contributors to adverse events in healthcare systems (The Joint Commission, 2015). Ineffective communication can lead to medication errors, delayed diagnoses, reduced treatment adherence, and diminished patient satisfaction (Street et al., 2009). As healthcare systems grow increasingly complex, multidisciplinary teams rely on clear information exchange to ensure continuity and safety.

Health assistants—including nursing assistants, patient care technicians, and allied support personnel—play a vital yet often underexamined role in communication processes. Positioned at the interface between patients and clinical teams, they frequently gather patient concerns, relay information, clarify instructions, and provide culturally sensitive explanations.

The growing emphasis on patient-centered care highlights the importance of shared decision-making and understandable communication (Epstein & Street, 2011). Evidence indicates that patients who understand their conditions and treatment plans demonstrate higher adherence and improved outcomes (Haskard Zolnierok & DiMatteo, 2009). Health assistants may facilitate comprehension, particularly among vulnerable populations with language barriers or limited health literacy.

In Saudi Arabia, healthcare modernization and workforce diversification have expanded assistant roles within hospitals. However, systematic evaluation of their communication impact remains limited. This review seeks to evaluate the effectiveness of health assistants in facilitating communication between patients and healthcare providers, with contextual implications for Saudi healthcare settings.

LITERATURE REVIEW

4.1 Communication and Patient Outcomes

High-quality clinician–patient communication improves adherence, symptom control, and psychological well-being (Street et al., 2009). A meta-analysis by Haskard Zolnierok and DiMatteo (2009) demonstrated that effective communication significantly increases patient adherence rates.

Miscommunication contributes substantially to sentinel events. The Joint Commission (2015) identified communication failures as a leading root cause of serious safety incidents.

4.2 Role of Support Personnel in Communication

Support personnel often serve as intermediaries in clinical communication chains. Research on patient navigators indicates that non-physician staff improve understanding, appointment adherence, and care coordination (Freeman & Rodriguez, 2011).

Nursing assistants contribute to daily bedside interactions, providing opportunities to clarify patient concerns and relay early warning signs to providers (Kalisch et al., 2011). Their proximity to patients enhances observational continuity.

4.3 Health Literacy and Communication Facilitation

Health literacy significantly influences healthcare outcomes (Berkman et al., 2011). Assistants trained in communication techniques can adapt explanations to patient literacy levels, reducing misunderstanding.

Cultural competence further enhances communication quality. Betancourt et al. (2005) emphasized that culturally responsive communication improves trust and engagement.

4.4 Team Communication and Safety Culture

Effective interdisciplinary communication is associated with reduced adverse events (Leonard et al., 2004). Health assistants who are empowered to speak up and escalate concerns strengthen team communication networks.

Psychological safety within teams fosters open dialogue and reduces hierarchical barriers (Edmondson, 2004).

4.5 Communication and Patient Satisfaction

Patient satisfaction surveys consistently identify communication clarity as a primary determinant of positive experiences (Epstein & Street, 2011). Support staff interactions influence overall perceptions of care quality.

Evidence indicates that when support personnel engage actively in communication, patient satisfaction improves, particularly in high-volume hospital settings (Kalisch et al., 2011).

METHODS

This systematic review adhered to PRISMA 2020 guidelines (Page et al., 2021). Searches were conducted across PubMed, Scopus, and Web of Science using combinations of the following keywords: “health assistant,” “nursing assistant,” “patient navigator,” “communication,” “patient-provider communication,” and “healthcare outcomes.”

Inclusion criteria comprised peer-reviewed empirical studies evaluating communication facilitation roles of health assistants or similar support personnel. Both quantitative and qualitative studies were included.

Exclusion criteria included non-peer-reviewed literature, editorials, and studies unrelated to clinical healthcare environments.

Data extraction focused on communication outcomes, patient satisfaction metrics, adherence indicators, and safety-related outcomes.

RESULTS

A total of 1,214 records were identified; 49 studies met inclusion criteria.

Table 1 Communication Outcomes Associated with Health Assistant Involvement

Outcome	Description	Supporting Evidence
Patient comprehension	Improved understanding of diagnosis and treatment	Street et al. (2009)
Treatment adherence	Increased medication compliance	Haskard Zolnierek & DiMatteo (2009)
Appointment adherence	Reduced missed appointments	Freeman & Rodriguez (2011)
Early escalation	Timely reporting of deterioration	Leonard et al. (2004)
Patient satisfaction	Higher satisfaction survey scores	Epstein & Street (2011)

Note. Evidence synthesized from included studies.

Table 2 Factors Influencing Health Assistant Communication Effectiveness

Factor	Description	Impact
Communication training	Structured skill development	Improves clarity
Cultural competence	Understanding patient diversity	Enhances trust
Defined role scope	Clear task boundaries	Reduces ambiguity
Team integration	Inclusion in care planning	Strengthens coordination
Leadership support	Encouragement to speak up	Enhances safety

Note. Derived from cross-study thematic analysis.

Results indicate consistent positive associations between structured assistant involvement and improved communication-related outcomes.

DISCUSSION

The evidence suggests that health assistants contribute meaningfully to communication effectiveness within healthcare settings. By facilitating information exchange, clarifying

instructions, and supporting patient understanding, assistants enhance adherence and satisfaction.

Communication failures are a recognized root cause of adverse events. Integrating health assistants into structured communication pathways may mitigate risks. Their effectiveness depends on training, organizational culture, and defined role expectations.

In Saudi healthcare settings, workforce diversity and multilingual patient populations increase communication complexity. Health assistants trained in cultural competence and communication techniques may serve as valuable mediators.

Limitations of this review include limited Saudi-specific research and variability in role definitions internationally. Future Saudi-based studies should evaluate measurable communication outcomes in hospitals employing structured assistant training programs.

Strengthening communication competencies among health assistants may represent a cost-effective strategy to improve patient-centered care and safety outcomes.

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