The Experiences of Health Care Practitioners dealing with emergencies at a Primary Health Care level

Meghan Botes (PhD Candidate)
Professor Judith Bruce and Dr Richard Cooke
UNIVERSITY OF THE WITWATERSRAND

Introduction

Health care systems, globally, have moved from a reactive system to a proactive system with the emphasis on prevention and promotion of health however, acute events continue to claim lives and cause disability which in a developing country puts further strain on a poorly resourced healthcare system and economy (Razak and Kuffmann, 2002). The 68th World Health Assembly has recognised that emergency care at a primary health care level is vital for reducing overall mortality and disability (World Health Assembly, 2015). Emergency Care at a Primary Health Care level has been neglected with the emphasis on prevention and promotion of health however, acute events increase. The prioritisation of emergency services at a primary health care level is deemed a highly cost-effective way to save the overall burden of disease on the health care system (World Health Assembly, 2015). In a consensus study by Hindkam and Wallis (2010) on the scope of emergency care in developing countries, the need for strengthening of the system at the primary health care level was identified.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

The integration of effective emergency services into primary health care directly reduces mortality and disability (World Health Assembly, 2015). Globally, there has been neglect in the area of emergency services offered at a primary health care setting, with particular emphasis on low- and middle-income earning countries (Obermeye et al., 2015). The South African Primary Health Care system has revealed weaknesses in the provision of emergency care (Mojaki et al., 2011; Visscher et al., 2013). Specialised emergency skills and resources required to deliver care are often not found at this level of care.

OBJECTIVES

Emergency care at a primary health care (PHC) level is situated within a broader system of care, the availability of resources, consultative support and the effectiveness of the referral system for emergencies is not known. The objectives of the study are to describe the experiences of health care providers dealing with emergencies at a PHC level.

Methods

RESEARCH SETTING

The research was conducted in the District Health Care system (DHS) of Giyani, South Africa. The DHS in Giyani is divided into various levels and five regions with a total of 392 PHC facilities spread across the different regions.

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODS

A Qualitative Formative Evaluation was conducted. This approach of qualitative research seeks to improve an intervention, programme or policy by identifying strengths and weaknesses and making recommendations for improvement (Patton, 2015). This presentation is a subsection of a broader study which seeks to analyse the system of emergency care at a Primary Health Care level using a framework for policy analysis. Walt and Gilson (1994) proposed a framework for the analysis of policy within a system. They propose that one is able to assess the need for policy reform or plan for effective implementation of policy. This policy analysis triangle can be used as conceptual model for primary health care facilities.

Figure 1: Walt and Gilson’s Policy Analysis Framework

The focus of the analysis begins with the “actants”, who in this analysis would be the professional nurses working in the primary health care facilities. For the purpose of this study, the team will include the health care professional practitioners dealing with medical emergencies at a primary health care level.

METHOD

In this phase of the study data were collected using semi-structured interviews and analysed using qualitative content analysis to describe experiences of health care practitioners dealing with emergencies at PHC level. Twenty-two participants were recruited using purposive sampling based on a sampling framework to include the various levels of facilities.

Results

Various themes emerged from the data. Participants’ experiences within each of these themes varied across regions. A common expressed need was for continuous training in emergency management. Team involvement and collaboration between practitioners was considered vital for optimal emergency management. Weaknesses within the referral system and associated processes were cited as a major concern.

Below is a summary of themes and subthemes:

- Personal Experience in Managing Emergencies at PHC level
  - Knowledge and familiarity with patient pathways
  - Training in emergency processes
  - Access to equipment and supplies
- Challenges in Providing Emergency Care at PHC level
  - Underfunding of emergency services
  - Resource shortages: Human, Material
  - Stretching of services
  - Management
  - Referral System
    - Poor understanding of the referral pathway (Ambulance/EMS)
    - Triage delays
- Ideal Clinic Status/Policies
  - Triage System
  - Emergency Care Process
  - Policy
  - Facility initiatives in providing training
  - Opinions about the Policy Requirements
  - Status of the facility
  - Time delays
  - Poor understanding of the referral pathway (Ambulance/EMS, interfacility)
  - Education and Training
    - Need for training
    - Challenges in getting training
    - Faculty, collaborators in providing training

Discussion

The South African Health review described the referral system as protracted, which subsequently leads to time delays in patients receiving definitive care in emergency situations (South African Health Review 2016, 2018). The process of referral in emergency cases includes stabilising of the patient, transfer and transporting of the patient. From the responses of the participants it is clear that there are challenges with each step of the referral process resulting in time delays and poorer patient outcomes. The findings indicate a lack of understanding of the referral pathway by the community and stakeholders with the most commonly reported challenge relating to ambulance and transport services for patients needing a transfer to another facility. The 2018 Health Review for South Africa reported the insufficiency of availability and quality of transport as well as the poor level of existing for ambulance staff (South African Health Review 2018, 2016). There was also a general sense that many of the receiving facilities were inaccessible in acceptance of a patient where the transferring facility indicated poor support.

The issue of staff shortages however, is not easily addressed. South Africa is faced with a complex network of problems including the inequitable distribution of human resources (van Rensburg, 2014). Challenges in availability of resources and equipment are also directly related to supply chain challenges which are a major barrier to service delivery.

Lastly, a team approach to emergency care has proven its efficacy over decades of research(Kellum, 2009). It is vital to ensure that health care practitioners are equipped and confident to lead a team in the emergency care process. The WHO guidelines for essential trauma care highlights the need for continuous education and training in emergency skills (Mock et al., 2004).