Health team communication especially critical in time of COVID-19

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Physicians and health professionals across the country have been working to protect Americans from the novel coronavirus for months now, and while there are countless lessons that have been learned, one is certainly the value of communication.

From the onset of the pandemic, many doctors and nurses took on new responsibilities as they were thrust onto different teams and into new situations as part of their efforts to care for patients with COVID-19. Successful communication among health care team members was and continues to be paramount. With it, teams can be dynamic and impactful as they collaborate to help patients recover. Without it, the results can be poor.

The benefits of good communication and the pitfalls of its absence are illustrated in “Working Effectively Within an Interprofessional Team,” which is being offered to all residents at no cost for a limited time during the COVID-19 pandemic. This course is one of more than 30 online courses available to medical and surgical residents at residency institutions that have subscribed to the AMA GME Competency Education Program.

With contributions by subject-matter experts from around the country, courses in the GME Competency Education Program aim to help residents fulfill core competency requirements necessary to complete training. Fulfilling those requirements is increasingly difficult with the realities of the ongoing pandemic. Several of the courses has been updated to include timely and relevant case studies.

What an effective team looks like


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The course kicks off by introducing why it is necessary to be able to identify team members and their specific roles within a team. Each person knows their responsibilities, and they understand how what they are supposed to do impacts the goal of the team overall.

The most effective teams, the course explains, have:

- A shared understanding of the team’s goal.
- Clear explanations and recognition of each person’s role within the team.
- Cohesion among team members.

How the dynamics differ between an effective and an ineffective team are clearly demonstrated in the course through the use of two simulation videos. Each video captures a team of interprofessional colleagues discussing treatment plans for a patient. The first scenario features a team that lacks defined roles and communicates poorly. The video demonstrates how this ineffectiveness affects the team members and can have devastating effects on patients.

The second scenario, on the other hand, captures a well-functioning team smoothly working together to talk through treatment plans for a patient. All of the team members know their roles and how they play parts in the overall care of the patient.

What effective communication sounds like

Effective communication can best be described as being complete, clear, brief and timely. As the course explains, effective communication features just enough information that can be easily understood by the intended audience. This can take place during a team meeting or huddle prior to a patient meeting or as part of pre- or post-procedure briefs.

Ineffective communication omits key elements of a patient’s story or is presented in a way that is not simple to understand. The effect of this can be catastrophic. In the course, it is reported that data from 2010-2013 shows that ineffective communication is one of the top three root causes of sentinel events.

To aid residency programs during the pandemic, six modules have been made available to residency institutions free of charge through year’s end. Visit the AMA GME Competency Education Program for more information on this and other offerings or to request a demo.