Review Article

Fostering a safe psychological environment and encouraging speak-up culture in primary care setups

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ABSTRACT

Patient safety is a critical concern in healthcare, and encouraging healthcare employees to speak up and voice their concerns plays a pivotal role in preventing avoidable harm to patients. Establishing a safe environment and fostering a supportive psychological climate within healthcare organizations, particularly in primary care settings, is essential for achieving better patient outcomes and enhancing overall organizational performance. This review emphasizes the importance of a safe environment and supportive psychological climate in primary care, enhancing patient outcomes and organizational performance. Speaking up leads to timely error correction, mitigates unsafe practices, and upholds ethical standards despite barriers like hierarchy, fear of retaliation, and inadequate policies. In the quest to foster a culture of speaking up, diverse interventions have emerged, ranging from comprehensive training initiatives to initiatives promoting psychological safety and establishing clear communication channels. Leadership development programs play a vital role in encouraging employee voices and fostering a positive environment for open communication. To advance further, research must evaluate intervention impact and contextual nuances for more tailored strategies. In conclusion, psychological safety is vital for speaking up and enhancing employee engagement, communication, and patient outcomes. Overcoming implementation challenges and fostering a culture of safety and open communication empower healthcare employees to contribute to continuous improvement in patient care. Leadership development plays a pivotal role in nurturing this culture envisioning a safer, compassionate healthcare ecosystem.

Keywords: Environment, Work, Wellbeing, Employees, Psychology

INTRODUCTION

Patient safety remains a central concern in healthcare, and healthcare employees who proactively speak up and raise concerns have been shown to play a pivotal role in detecting and preventing avoidable harm to patients.[1] One crucial factor that significantly impacts both patient safety and employee morale is the presence of a safe environment and a supportive psychological climate within healthcare organizations. In primary care setups, where healthcare professionals work closely with patients on a daily basis, fostering a culture that encourages employees to speak up

about concerns is essential for promoting better patient outcomes and overall organizational performance.[2,3] Speaking up allows healthcare professionals to address potential errors, unsafe practices, and ethical issues promptly, leading to improved patient outcomes and enhanced overall quality of care.[4] By voicing their concerns, healthcare workers provide opportunities for learning and system improvements, thereby contributing to the continuous improvement of healthcare services.[5]

Organizations that cultivate an environment where employees feel safe to speak up are associated with better

patient outcomes, improved patient safety, enhanced patient experience, reduced costs, and increased staff well-being and morale.[6] However, speaking up is not always a straightforward process, as many healthcare professionals may feel hesitant to voice their concerns due to fear of repercussions, organizational inaction, or the desire to conform.[7,8]

This narrative literature review aims to explore the significance of creating a safe and supportive environment for healthcare employees in primary care settings, with a focus on encouraging a culture of speaking up. The objectives include examining the impact of speaking up on patient outcomes, identifying barriers and facilitators for open communication, and evaluating interventions to promote psychological safety and effective communication.

THE ROLE OF SPEAKING UP

Speaking up, or voice behaviour, within healthcare, is defined as the act of raising concerns about unsafe, unethical, or poor-quality practices within healthcare teams with the intention of benefiting patient safety and care quality.[9] Speaking up is a critical aspect of promoting patient safety, as it can prevent errors and provide opportunities for learning and system improvements.[10,11] There are two main aspects to speaking up: promotive voice, which involves expressing ideas or suggestions to improve work practices, and prohibitive voice, which involves raising concerns about existing practices or behaviors that may be detrimental to the organization.[11]

Both forms of voice behavior are essential for fostering patient safety and a positive organizational culture. Evidence-based studies have shown that promoting a speak-up culture leads to better patient safety outcomes. For example, a study by Noort et al found that hospitals with better communication and teamwork climates had lower rates of adverse events and patient mortality.[11]

A study conducted on healthcare workers (HCWs) found that patient safety concerns were frequently reported by doctors and nurses, ranging between 62% and 80%. However, only 55% to 76% of HCWs reported speaking up about these concerns, while 19% to 39% withheld their voice.[3] The study highlighted that a positive and encouraging environment was linked to more frequent speaking up, whereas higher levels of psychological safety were associated with less frequent speaking up. In another study by Gilmartin, a positive speaking-up-related climate was associated with a higher likelihood of speaking-up behaviors and a lower likelihood of withholding voice among healthcare workers.[12]

BARRIERS TO PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY AND SPEAKING UP IN PRIMARY CARE

In primary care settings, the establishment of psychological safety is paramount to encourage employees to freely express their concerns and ideas without fear of negative consequences.[13] However, studies identified several barriers that impede the development of such a culture (Figure 1).
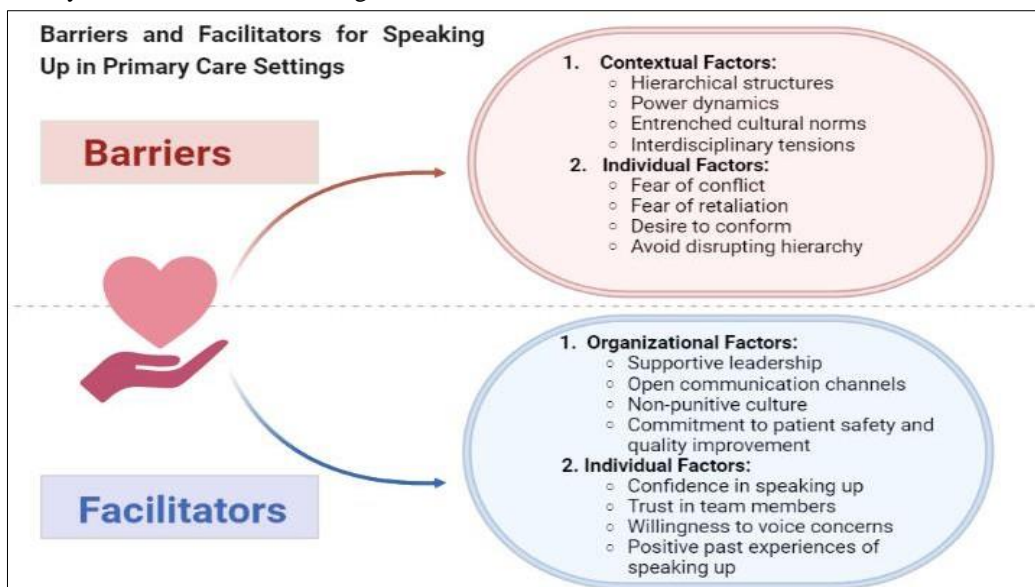
Figure 1: Barriers and facilitators for speaking up in primary care settings.

Hierarchical structures, power dynamics, and entrenched cultural norms within these healthcare environments often hinder open communication and discourage employees from speaking up. The fear of conflict, retaliation, and the belief that their concerns might not be taken seriously further deters healthcare professionals from voicing their worries.[14] Additionally, the existing power dynamics and hierarchical structures may discourage junior staff from speaking up to their superiors, contributing to a culture of silence.[15] To foster a culture of psychological safety and encourage speaking-up behaviors, it is imperative to address and overcome these barriers, promoting a

collaborative and open environment where all employees feel empowered to share their valuable insights.[16]

A study of 62 healthcare professionals revealed a hierarchical culture in medicine as a major barrier to speaking up about patient safety. Newer professionals felt uncomfortable due to a perceived lack of knowledge and authority.[4] Institutional, interpersonal, and individual cultures, especially leadership, influenced speaking up behaviors. Encouragement from leaders led to more willingness to express concerns. Strategies to speak up were individualized and context-dependent, such as using patient safety as a rationale and seeking input from senior colleagues.[15,17]

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF A SAFE ENVIRONMENT AND PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY IN PRIMARY CARE

Patient safety and quality of care

In primary care settings, healthcare professionals play a pivotal role in early diagnosis, preventive care, and disease management. Patient safety is paramount, and any lapses in communication or failures to address concerns promptly can have severe consequences for patients.[4] A safe environment, characterized by open communication, mutual respect, and a culture that values continuous improvement, is fundamental for enhancing patient safety and providing optimal care.[18]

Employee well-being and job satisfaction

The well-being and job satisfaction of healthcare employees directly influence their performance and dedication to patient care. The research identified that a supportive work environment that prioritizes psychological safety - the perception that individuals can speak up and express their ideas, opinions, and concerns without fear of negative consequences - contributes to higher levels of employee satisfaction, reduced burnout, and increased retention rates. Encouraging employees to speak up and actively participate in problem-solving enhances their sense of empowerment and engagement in the workplace.[17]

THE ROLE OF PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY IN ENCOURAGING SPEAKING UP

Psychological safety, defined as the perception of safety in taking interpersonal risks within the work environment, is a fundamental factor influencing speaking-up behaviour in healthcare teams.[19] Psychological safety in the workplace refers to an environment where employees feel safe to voice their opinions, raise concerns, and contribute ideas without the fear of being embarrassed, ridiculed, or punished. In primary care settings, this sense of psychological safety is vital for effective teamwork, communication, and patient care.[20] When healthcare professionals feel psychologically safe, they are more likely to engage in a promotive voice by expressing ideas and suggestions to improve work practices. They are also more likely to engage in prohibitive voice by raising concerns about existing practices that may be detrimental to patient safety.[21]

Psychological safety provides a foundation for open communication and teamwork, supporting a culture where employees feel safe to speak up and contribute to continuous improvement.[12]

Research has shown that psychological safety is associated with higher levels of employee engagement, improved communication, better patient outcomes, and reduced medical errors. Studies have also emphasized the importance of leadership behavior in shaping a culture of psychological safety within teams. A study conducted on healthcare teams revealed that establishing a psychologically safe environment is crucial for encouraging employee voice.[19] Team members expressed higher levels of psychological safety when discussing patient safety but hesitated to speak up about conflict or personal issues, especially among junior team members. The research emphasized the positive impact of supportive leadership, where inclusive behaviors and soliciting input from team members contributed to a psychologically safe atmosphere. Moreover, teams that actively promoted learning behaviors and facilitated open discussions experienced enhanced psychological safety.[18]

Table 1 presents the challenges and facilitators related to fostering a speak-up culture in healthcare settings, highlighting hierarchical structures, fear of retaliation, and lack of supportive policies as barriers while emphasizing the importance of psychological safety and leadership in promoting open communication and a safe environment for employees to voice their concerns.

THE NEED FOR INTERVENTIONS TO FOSTER SPEAKING-UP BEHAVIOR

Recognizing the crucial role of speaking up in improving patient safety and healthcare quality, there is a growing need to develop and implement effective interventions that support and encourage speaking-up behaviors among healthcare professionals. Understanding the strategies and mechanisms that have been successful in promoting speaking up will help inform best practices and guide healthcare organizations in creating safer environments that prioritize patient safety and employee well-being.[1,17]

A study conducted on 831 healthcare workers from various professions, including nurses, physicians, and others, examined patient safety culture and voice behaviors in a Korean healthcare context. The findings revealed that nurses had fewer positive perceptions of patient safety culture compared to physicians and other healthcare workers.[2] Communication openness, organizational learning, hospital management support for patient safety, reporting patient adverse events, and supervisor/clinical

leader support for patient safety were associated with promotive voice behaviors, while communication openness, teamwork, hospital management support for patient safety, reporting patient adverse events, and supervisor/clinical leader support for patient safety influenced prohibitive voice behaviors. These results underscore the significance of fostering a positive patient safety culture and providing support and resources to encourage healthcare workers to speak up and contribute to improved patient safety outcomes.

Table 1: Empowering voices: creating a fearless speak-up culture.[1]

Challenges to speaking up	Encouraging a speak-up culture
Hierarchical structures and power dynamics	**Fostering psychological safety**
Communication barriers due to organizational hierarchy	Establish an environment of value, support, and respect
Junior staff reluctance to voice concerns to superiors	Implement training on effective communication and conflict resolution
Fear of retaliation and reprisals	**Creating supportive reporting systems**
Lack of psychological safety leads to fear of reprisals	Develop anonymous reporting systems for safe sharing of concerns
Creates a culture of silence, hindering issue identification	Facilitate identification and resolution of potential safety risks
Lack of supportive policies and systems	**Leadership's role in modeling and encouraging open communication**
Absence of robust reporting mechanisms and policies	Leaders model open communication and value employee input
Employees uncertain about appropriate steps to address safety concerns	Respond positively to suggestions and concerns, setting the tone for a speak- up culture

Researchers have implemented various intervention approaches to enhance psychological safety and promote speaking up in primary care settings (Table 2). These interventions can be categorized into four main types.

Educational initiatives

Educational interventions, such as workshops and training programs, have been designed to educate employees about the importance of speaking up and to equip them with effective communication skills. These initiatives aim to empower employees with the confidence to voice their concerns and ideas.[4,22]

Workplace training programs

Workplace training programs focus on team communication and interdisciplinary collaboration. By breaking down hierarchical barriers and promoting open dialogue, these programs aim to create a culture of trust and mutual respect among team members.[20]

Workplace initiatives

Some interventions are integrated into routine workplace processes, such as Executive WalkRounds™ and patient safety courses. These initiatives provide structured opportunities for employees to voice their concerns and contribute to patient safety.[1,20]

Executive ward round

The executive ward round (EWR) intervention aimed to enhance psychological safety by promising to address the concerns raised by frontline employees. However, the results of this intervention were mixed. In a study, the EWR intervention successfully improved psychological safety, leading to increased confidence among colleagues to speak up.[23] However, in other instances, the intervention created an expectation of mutual respect among staff, which was later unfulfilled, resulting in negative repercussions. Broken promises and a failure to maintain mutual respect dampened employees' willingness to participate in subsequent interventions and hindered open communication. These findings emphasize the importance of not only promoting psychological safety but also ensuring that interventions foster genuine mutual respect to encourage a culture of speaking up effectively.[24]

IMPLEMENTATION CHALLENGES

Various factors, including workplace culture, hierarchies, resistance to change, fidelity to intervention models and interdisciplinary relationships, influence the implementation of speak-up interventions in healthcare settings. Existing hierarchical structures often discourage open communication, hindering the introduction of more inclusive discussions.[7] Even with encouragement from lead physicians, certain clinical concerns may remain off-limits due to persistent hierarchical tensions.[5] Additionally, the support of medical leaders can significantly impact intervention success, with positive support promoting implementation and negative attitudes impeding progress. Societal and cultural norms, such as national expectations, also act as barriers, particularly in hierarchical workplaces.[25,26] However, many studies overlook broader societal influences like racism or homophobia, focusing primarily on workplace cultures.[27]

Acknowledging and addressing these factors within both local and broader contexts are crucial for successful intervention implementation and informed policy recommendations (Table 3).

CHALLENGES/FUTURE DIRECTION

Challenges faced by employees for speaking up and creating a safe psychological environment in primary care settings have been identified through research studies. These challenges include hierarchical structures within healthcare organizations, which can create a power imbalance and deter employees from voicing their concerns openly.[15] Fear of retaliation or negative consequences for speaking up is another significant barrier. Limited communication channels and time constraints in busy clinical settings can also hinder the effective expression of safety concerns.[26]

Future directions to promote speaking up in primary care settings include implementing comprehensive training programs for effective communication, fostering a culture of psychological safety, and establishing clear communication channels and feedback mechanisms.[28] Leadership development programs are essential for encouraging employees' voices and creating a positive speaking-up environment.[27] Future research should focus on evaluating intervention impacts, conducting longitudinal studies, and understanding contextual factors influencing speaking-up behaviors for tailored strategies.

Table 2: Strategies to foster a speak-up culture in healthcare.

Strategy	Description
Promote psychological safety	Create a safe environment for employees to speak up without fear of retribution. Encourage open communication and provide non-punitive responses to concerns
Provide training	Offer communication and assertiveness training to healthcare workers to equip them with the skills and confidence to speak up effectively
Implement anonymous reporting systems	Establish channels for confidential and anonymous reporting of safety concerns. Overcome fears of reprisal through anonymity
Promote a just culture	Foster a culture of learning from mistakes and avoiding blame. Encourage open discussions about safety issues without fear of punishment
Lead by example	Leaders should model speaking-up behaviors and prioritize safety, and demonstrate commitment to addressing reported concerns
Feedback and follow-up	Promptly acknowledge and address employees' concerns. Provide feedback on outcomes of reported concerns, reinforcing the importance of speaking up
Regular communication and team meetings	Cultivate a culture of open communication and collaboration. Encourage employees to voice concerns during team meetings
Continuous quality improvement	Involve employees in identifying and resolving safety issues. Prioritize ongoing improvements in patient safety

Table 3: Initiatives and standards for promoting speaking up in healthcare settings.[29]

Categories	Interventions	Description
Transnational initiatives/ standards	ISO 9001	Emphasizes the importance of communication within organizations, encouraging employees to voice their concerns and suggestions to improve quality management systems
National initiatives/ standards	Occupational safety and health act (OSHA)	Requires employers to establish mechanisms for employees to report safety concerns and protects whistleblowers from retaliation
	Affordable care act (ACA)	Includes provisions to protect healthcare workers who report violations or unsafe practices in healthcare settings
Local initiatives/ standards	Hospital-specific speak-up campaigns	Many healthcare organizations run local campaigns to encourage employees to speak up about patient safety concerns and provide channels for anonymous reporting
	State whistleblower protection laws	Some states have specific laws that protect employees from retaliation for reporting violations of laws or regulations in their workplace
	Company-specific policies	Individual companies may have their policies and procedures in place to encourage and protect employees who speak up about safety issues or ethical concerns

CONCLUSION

This narrative review highlights the importance of promoting psychological safety and a speak-up culture in primary care to enhance patient safety. Tailored interventions are needed to address unique challenges in each setting. Trust, open communication, and support are key in empowering employees to speak up. Overcoming funding and cultural barriers requires strong leadership and a complex systems perspective. Further research should explore policy impacts and contextual factors for effective strategies. Collaboration among stakeholders is vital to creating open and safe healthcare cultures, valuing employee voice, and ensuring continuous improvement for patient well-being.

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