

CONCEPT ANALYSIS PAPER: CLINICAL HANDOFF

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Abstract

Background: Effective communication during clinical handover is a critical component of patient safety and quality care delivery in nursing practice. As healthcare environments become increasingly complex, failures in communication—especially during shift changes or patient transfers—have been directly linked to adverse events and compromised patient outcomes. Despite its importance, the concept of clinical handover remains inconsistently defined and implemented across healthcare settings.

Aims: This study aims to analyze and clarify the concept of clinical handover within the context of nursing. Using Walker and Avant's concept analysis method, the goal is to identify the defining attributes, antecedents, consequences, and empirical referents of clinical handover, and to explore its theoretical relevance and implications for nursing education, practice, and patient safety.

Methodology: The concept analysis was conducted using Walker and Avant's (1986) eight-step framework. This structured approach involved defining the concept, identifying its uses in literature and clinical practice, analyzing key attributes, and exploring antecedents, consequences, and observable indicators. The analysis incorporated a review of current evidence and theoretical models, including systems theory and human factors theory.

Findings: Clinical handover is defined as a standardized, real-time communication process in which responsibility and accountability for patient care are transferred between healthcare providers. Antecedents include scheduled shift changes, patient admissions, discharges, and interdepartmental transfers. Consequences of effective handover include improved coordination of care, reduced clinical errors, and a stronger culture of safety. Poor handovers may lead to communication breakdowns, incomplete information transfer, and increased patient risk. Empirical referents include standardized documentation tools, checklists, electronic handover systems, and observed bedside handover practices.

Conclusions: Clinical handover is a core nursing competency that supports safe, continuous, and high-quality patient care. This concept analysis provides greater conceptual clarity, offering guidance for nursing education, policy development, and practice improvement. Standardization of handover processes, supported by theoretical frameworks such as systems theory, is essential to reducing variability and enhancing communication among healthcare teams. As such, clinical handover should remain a priority area for research, training, and organizational development in modern healthcare settings.

INTRODUCTION

Handoff contribution to healthcare quality is being increasingly recognized as evidence grows linking communication defects to patient safety lapses. The concept of a handoff is complex and includes communication between the change of shift, communication between care providers about patient care, handoff, records, and information tools to assist in communication between care providers about patient care. (George & O'Reilly, 2023).

This concept analysis explores "clinical handover" as a fundamental element of nursing communication. Accurate and effective clinical handover is essential to ensuring patient safety, continuity of care, and interprofessionally collaboration. Using Walker and Avant's (1986) model of concept analysis, this paper examines the concept through its attributes, antecedents, consequences, empirical referents, and theoretical relevance.

Walker and Avant (2005) define concept analysis as a means to clarify over-used or vague concepts that are prevalent in clinical practice. It is a reasonable and logical method that has served the development of science in many disciplines over time.

The selected concept is clinical handover, referring to the standardized transfer of patient care responsibility and accountability between healthcare providers. It is an indispensable component in both routine and critical transitions within clinical settings.

Define the Concept

Handoff is defined as verbal reports with the objective of relating what occurred and what care was given to a patient during the previous shift so that the next shift's members know the fundamental aspects of the patient's present condition, in an effort to agreement of continuity of care. Handoff is used to describe the event that occurs when the care of the patient is in transition between healthcare providers. Patient's care handoffs are described as the exchange of patient's information between healthcare professionals, accompanying either a transfer of control or responsibility (Kim & Seomun, 2020).

Also, nursing foundations books refer to it as a vital report for the continuity of care in which a group of nurses who are leaving can report the updated patient information to the entire entering group. The report should be complete and concise, with no regard for

the method employed, focusing on the patient (following a specific order) and not a moment for social conversation. A handoff is a transfer and acceptance of patient care responsibility achieved through effective communication. It is a real time process of passing patient specific information from one caregiver to another or from one team of caregivers the continuity and safety of the patient's care (Appelbaum et al., 2021).

Clinical handover the structured communication process by which information related to a patient's condition, treatment, and care plan is transmitted from one healthcare provider to another. This process supports safe and consistent patient care and is especially critical during shift changes, transfers, and discharges (Burgess & Kalman, 2020).

Identifying the Use of Concept in Nursing

Initially, handovers were informal and lacked consistency, relying heavily on memory and verbal communication. As healthcare systems evolved, so did the complexity of patient care, prompting the development of structured communication frameworks like SBAR. Recent global initiatives emphasize the importance of standardizing clinical handovers as a strategy to reduce medical errors and improve patient safety (Sujan et al., 2019).

Core Characteristics of the Concept

A Core Skill

one of the most crucial steps in a patient's journey is the clinical handover, a core skill that must be taught to junior clinicians and health professions students.

Conceptual clarity about Handoffs gives empirical direction for future research and a theoretical underpinning for large of studies about nurses.

Direct Transfer of Information

Clinical handover is a direct transfer of information about patients, supporting the circulation of clinical accountability and responsibility among healthcare professionals to enable continuity of care for the patient and facilitates shared awareness of patients' conditions and planned management (Burgess & Kalman, 2020).

Continuity and Safety of the Patient's Care

It is a real time process of passing patient specific information from one caregiver to another or from one team of caregivers to another for the purpose of ensuring the continuity and safety of the patient's care (Appelbaum et al., 2021).

Identify Defining Attributes

- Use of a standardized structure (e.g., SBAR, iSoBAR)
- Accurate and comprehensive patient information exchange
- Bidirectional interaction (allowing questions and clarifications)
- Clear accountability and responsibility transfer
- Aimed at ensuring continuity and safety of care

Examine Antecedents and Consequences

Antecedents:

- Scheduled or unscheduled shift changes
- Admission, discharge, or interdepartmental transfers
- Clinical responsibilities that require continuity

Consequences:

- Improved continuity and coordination of care
- Reduction in clinical errors and adverse events
- Enhanced team communication and patient safety culture
- Poor handovers may result in information gaps and compromised patient outcomes (Manias et al., 2020)

Analyze Empirical Referents

Observable indicators of clinical handover include:

- Implementation of standardized tools like SBAR
- Presence of documentation practices or electronic handover templates
- Use of handover checklists
- Observation of bedside or team-based handover protocols

- Audit results reflecting adherence to handover standards (Anderson et al., 2021)

Evaluate Theoretical Framework

Clinical handover is supported by systems theory and human factors theory, both of which emphasize the importance of communication in reducing variability and improving safety outcomes. The SBAR framework, rooted in aviation safety science, provides a theoretical foundation for structured, predictable communication patterns in healthcare environments (Sujan et al., 2019).

Synthesize Findings

Clinical handover is a multidimensional nursing concept that integrates communication, accountability, and coordination of care. Its effectiveness is enhanced by standardized frameworks and supportive policies. With increasing emphasis on patient safety and healthcare quality, handover practices are becoming central to quality assurance and interprofessionally collaboration in modern healthcare systems.

Clarify Ambiguities

While standardization is widely recommended, ambiguity remains regarding the optimal duration, content detail, and setting of handovers. Variability in practice persists due to institutional differences, staff training levels, and technological resources. Research continues to explore the effectiveness of digital handover tools and patient-involved handover practices (Manias et al., 2020).

Reflect on Clinical Relevance

In contemporary nursing practice, clinical handover is pivotal for ensuring safe, high-quality patient care. It fosters interprofessionally teamwork, minimizes risks, and supports evidence-based nursing interventions. The relevance of handover is evident across all healthcare settings, making it a critical competency in nursing education and practice improvement initiatives.

Write a Concept Analysis Paper

This paper applies Walker and Avant's (1986) method to thoroughly examine the concept of clinical handover. Each step, from definition to theoretical

framework and clinical relevance, has been explored using up-to-date sources to reflect current practices and needs in nursing.

Peer Review and Feedback

The completed concept analysis will be reviewed by nursing faculty and peers to enhance academic rigor, clarity, and applicability. Constructive feedback will guide the refinement of the concept's interpretation and contextual application.

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