

Title The importance of understanding practitioner experiences when attempting to improve the quality of general practice

Abstract

While some definitions of quality health care are now incorporating the patient's experience, unfortunately the role of the general practice team is still neglected. This paper describes how practitioner experiences of providing quality care differ between practitioner groups, and it argues that understanding the perspective of these health care practitioners is an important step towards improving the quality of general practice; the rationale being that to influence behaviour one must first understand the nature of that behaviour and its determinants. Only from such an understanding can one determine what combination of systems, incentives and/or sanctions is most likely to bring about improvements in health care. To date, this principle has been incompletely applied when attempting to improve the quality of general practice services. Qualitative interviews conducted with 38 practice nurses and 24 general practitioners in Australia reveal that both parties find it difficult to articulate precisely what constitutes quality in their minds. Processes, and in particular, the preparations for practice accreditation, are often used as a proxy for quality in discussions with these care providers, and when asked what benefit practice nurses bring to general practice, doctors and nurses provide differing accounts. Attempts to improve safety and quality are more likely to be successful if the differing understandings of practitioners are acknowledged and incorporated into strategies. Ideally, all members of the general practice team would share and support a communal understanding of quality.