Primary Care: A Pragmatic, Low-cost Intervention in Patient Safety

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A mother brought her baby to the Health Clinic because her baby had not passed motion for several days. She was very worried as the baby’s abdomen was getting bigger and he had refused to drink milk. She had hoped that the doctor would be able to tell her what was wrong with her baby or perhaps referred her baby to a hospital. However, after seeing the doctor, her baby was prescribed a suppository and sent home.

Even without medical training, one could tell that there was something not quite right with the outcome of the visit to the clinic.

A team of Family Medicine Specialists (FMS), together with the Institute for Health Systems Research (IHSR), carried out a study on patient safety incidents in their efforts to improve patient care at the primary care level. Their investigation detected lapses in case management, inadequate investigations, errors in decision-making and medication errors such as inappropriate medication prescribing, as well as inadequate documentation; most of these were preventable.

A presentation of the study findings to the Deputy Director General of Health (Public Health) led to the allocation of RM0.5 million to every state Health Department in 2010 to fund training, using a study intervention package developed by the MOH aimed to improve patient safety. Response from clinicians was encouraging, and with the active involvement of the Family Health Development Division (FHDD), Ministry of Health (MOH), part of the intervention package is currently undergoing its third revision for all MOH primary care clinics.
A Low-Cost Intervention

The FMSs from the MOH and universities, together with IHSR, developed an intervention package and tested it in a controlled trial at 12 MOH clinics.

The intervention package consisted of important updates on clinical knowledge and skills for healthcare providers, clinical audits by supervisors, pharmacy safe netting, formatted medical record forms and education materials such as videos to improve clinical sign detection.

The Quick Flip Chart which serves as a fast and accessible reference for clinical management is another educational material that resulted from this research (Figure 1). This popular tool is now used throughout MOH clinics in the country, with frequent reprints and timely updates. Challenges remain, in making it relevant in today’s information technology era.

In addition to education and communication materials, training sessions to improve patient safety in the form of Continuous Medical Education (CME) were also continuously organized for healthcare providers.

Improving Patient Safety

The researchers found that vital improvement could be achieved such as preventable incidents, management errors, inadequate documentation practices and medication errors through the low-cost intervention package.

First Point of Care

Since implementation of this low-cost intervention package, health clinics have become a safer first point of contact for patients. Health clinics have provided a better standard of care and serve as referring centres for more complicated cases. By actively working through research informed by empirical observations, IHSR not only strives to protect patients from harm, but also ensures better care is provided to the public.