

Exploring the views of nurses and supervisors on leadership competencies for enhanced primary healthcare services



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ABSTRACT

High-quality patient care in primary healthcare (PHC) settings depends on the professional skills of nurse supervisors. Competent nurse supervisors can efficiently manage resources such as staff, tools, and workflows to provide the best possible patient care. The purpose of this study was to determine the perspectives of nurse supervisors and nurse managers on the competencies required of nurse supervisors for improved service delivery in PHC settings. This study used a descriptive-quantitative design and was conducted in the north-central regions of Saudi Arabia. The researchers used convenience sampling to recruit 107 PHC nurse supervisors and 110 nurses. The study found that most of the respondents were female supervisors (93%), staff aged between 20 and 44 years (88%), graduate staff (48%), and supervisors with more than five years of hospital experience (44.4%). According to the nurses' perception, the communication skills of the supervisors were low ($M=8.42$, $SD=1.12$). On the other hand, nurse managers rated themselves as having low communication skills (mean=7.64, $SD=2.00$) and financial management skills (mean=7.87, $SD=1.95$). The study found that nurses believed their supervisors were competent. However, both staff and supervisors identified a need for improvement in communication skills. Financial management skills were perceived as weak by nurse supervisors.

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1. Introduction

Universally, the professional competencies of a nurse supervisor in primary healthcare (PMC) relate to the skills, knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors required for a nurse supervisor to carry out their role effectively in promoting the delivery of high-quality care to patients (Fukada, 2018; NMC, 2018; WHO, 2023; Michielsen et al., 2023). Some standard professional competencies for nurse supervisors in primary healthcare settings may include leadership and management skills, competency in clinical practice, knowledge of health policies and regulations, practical communication skills, ability to supervise and mentor other nurses, critical thinking

and problem-solving abilities, and organizational and time management skills (Greiner and Knebel, 2020; Munyewende et al., 2016).

Nurse supervisors should possess these competencies to enhance quality patient care, improve service delivery, optimize resources, and mobilize a team of highly skilled nurses for better health outcomes. With well-developed competencies, nurse supervisors can effectively manage their teams, delegate responsibilities, communicate appropriately with their colleagues, and intervene promptly, promoting teamwork among healthcare providers (Gottlieb et al., 2021; López-Ibort et al., 2021; Weaver, 2016). Furthermore, nurse supervisors are crucial in guiding and mentoring other nurses in their facilities. By having the necessary competencies, nurse supervisors can provide guidance and ensure that the clinical skills and knowledge of nurses under their supervision correspond to standards.

In Saudi Arabia, significant healthcare reforms are underway as part of its Vision 2030 program,

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aimed at establishing well-established health centers and healthcare services to support its citizens (Alasiri and Mohammed, 2022). The healthcare system is undergoing a series of changes, with expanding clusters implemented to improve the interconnected and integrated healthcare providers network within an all-inclusive administrative framework.

However, some challenges still require improvement, including improving the safety and quality of healthcare services, establishing adequate information systems, addressing the increasing prevalence of chronic diseases, filling leadership and management gaps, and resolving deficiencies in the referral system (Al Khashan et al., 2021; Alabbasi et al., 2022; Walston et al., 2018). Additionally, nurses' work dissatisfaction has been identified as an issue in nursing leadership and management (Alilyyani et al., 2022). Thus, investing resources in developing and enhancing the competencies of nurse managers should be made a priority to ensure that the healthcare system meets the growing needs of its citizens.

Although there is literature that discusses nurse supervisors' competencies, few address the competencies of nurse supervisors (Feliciano et al., 2021; Alamri, 2021), specifically in primary healthcare centers in Saudi Arabia. Therefore, given this knowledge gap and the current challenges primary healthcare nurses face in the country, this research study examined the professional competencies of primary healthcare nurse supervisors as perceived by themselves and their nursing staff. By understanding how nurse supervisors view their competencies and how those competencies are perceived by their staff, healthcare organizations and policymakers can make more informed decisions about where to allocate resources to develop and enhance these professionals' skills. Implementing such measures will support improvements to the healthcare system, enabling the delivery of high-quality care to all citizens in the country.

2. Methodology

A descriptive-quantitative research design was used in this study to evaluate the professional competencies of nurse supervisors in primary healthcare centers within the northern central regions of Saudi Arabia.

The study took place in the north-central areas of Saudi Arabia, specifically in the Hail and Al-Qassim regions. Through the convenience sampling method, 217 respondents (107 PHC nurse supervisors and 110 nurse staff) were pursued. A simple criterion of at least a diploma in nursing and more than a year of experience as a nurse supervisor or nursing staff in a primary healthcare center was imposed as eligibility for participation in this study.

Data were garnered utilizing a 40-item questionnaire, which was disseminated to potential participants via a hyperlink embedded within a

Google form, accompanied by a formal letter soliciting their participation in the study. The period of data acquisition spanned from September to October 2022.

The research tool developed by Munyewende et al. (2016) was used in evaluating individual and organizational performances. It consists of six domains: the first was communication- consisting of five items for assessing the supervisor's ability to listen actively, document information accurately, and share information effectively; secondly, leadership and management, containing six items that examine the supervisor's strategic planning skills to achieve organizational objectives; the third focused on human resource management and staff management with eight items; the fourth was the evaluation of financial management skills with nine items; the fifth was planning, and priority setting that evaluated the supervisor's ability to manage and prioritize resources effectively and efficiently using six items; and lastly, the problem-solving skills comprising six items that measured the supervisor's ability to identify problems in the work environment affecting patients and staff, respond promptly to emergencies, and develop corrective actions to mitigate potential risks and problems.

The questionnaire used has two parts. Part 1 contains questions related to the demographic profile of the respondents, including gender, age, educational attainment, and years of service. Part 2 contains 40 items, presented identically in two separate questionnaires: one for nurse supervisors to self-evaluate their performances and one for staff nurses to evaluate their supervisors' performance. Each item was rated on a 10-point Likert scale, with scores ranging from 1 to 10 indicating low or high competency levels requiring or not requiring additional training.

The data underwent rigorous statistical examination employing SPSS software, version 26. To elucidate the demographic characteristics of the sample, descriptive statistical methods, encompassing the calculation of frequencies and percentages, were applied. Furthermore, the assessment of perceptions held by nurse supervisors and their subordinates regarding the professional competencies of nurse supervisors in primary healthcare environments was facilitated through the computation of means, standard deviations, and skewness values.

3. Results of the study

Table 1 describes the demographic composition of the study respondents, revealing a predominantly female participation. All 107 nurse managers were female, while only 6.4% (7 out of 110) of the nurses surveyed were male. The majority of respondents were between the ages of 20 and 44. The educational qualifications of the nurse managers varied, with 48% holding a diploma and 22% a Bachelor of Science in Nursing (BSN) degree. Notably, a significant proportion of nurse supervisors had

significant work experience, with 44.4% having between 5-10 years and 40.6% having more than 10 years. At the same time, a significant segment of

nurses, 32%, reported experience between 2 and 5 years.

Table 1: Demographic profile of respondents (N=217)

		Nurse supervisors (%)	Nursing staff (%)
Gender	Male	0	7.0
	Female	100	93
Age	20 – 44 years old	81.5	88
	45 and above	18.5	12
Educational attainment	Diploma	48.1	48
	BSN graduate	22.2	46
	Master's degree	14.8	6.0
	Ph.D. degree	14.8	0
Years of service	Less than 1	13	17
	2 – 5	2.0	32
	5 – 10	44.4	28
	More than 10	40.6	23
Total		107	110

Table 2 illustrates the perceptions of nurse managers and their subordinates regarding the competencies of nurse managers in primary care settings. The median ratings of the staff nurses ranged from 9.91 to 10, with a standard deviation (SD) ranging from 2.14 to 3.05. In contrast, nurse supervisors' ratings ranged from 8.0 to 9.22, with an SD of 1.15 to 2.19. In addition, the preponderance of the skewness data set registers below zero,

indicating a negatively skewed distribution of the data. These results indicate that RNs overwhelmingly rated their nurse supervisors highly on five different competencies, with communication receiving the lowest rating. Conversely, nurse managers gave themselves higher ratings in the areas of personnel and staff management, but lower self-ratings in the areas of communication and financial management.

Table 2: Perceptions of the nurse supervisors and nursing staff on the competencies of nurse supervisors in the PHC

Groups	Statistics	Communication	Leadership and management	Human resource management and staff management	Financial management skills	Planning and priority-setting	Problem-solving skills
Nursing staff	Mean	8.427	8.45	8.48	8.04	8.477	8.47
	Median	9.600	10.00	10.00	10.00	9.917	9.92
	SD	2.146	2.32	2.30	3.05	2.40	2.40
	Skewness	-1.385	-1.50	-1.56	-1.65	-1.57	-1.80
Nurse supervisors	Mean	7.646	7.92	8.18	7.87	7.800	7.77
	Median	8.000	9.17	9.22	8.00	8.667	8.67
	SD	2.005	1.15	2.01	1.95	2.199	2.25
	Skewness	-0.330	-0.47	-0.74	-0.3	-0.577	-0.73

Table 3 presents data indicating that both nursing supervisors and their subordinates perceived elevated competencies across most evaluated domains. These domains exhibit median values oscillating between 9.1 and 9.6, accompanied by SD in the range of 2.16 to 2.34. An outlier to this trend is observed in the domain of communication skills, which manifests a comparatively lower median value

of 8.80, with an SD of 2.10. There exists a consensus between the two groups concerning the competencies of nurse supervisors, with the self-perceptions of nursing supervisors aligning closely with the assessments of their subordinates. Despite this congruence, the data underscores a discernible need for enhancement in communication skills.

Table 3: Combined result of the two groups of respondents on the competencies of nurse supervisor

Statistics	Communication	Leadership and management	Human resource management and staff management	Financial management skills	Planning and priority-setting	Problem-solving skills
Mean	8.036	8.185	8.331	8.154	8.143	8.126
Median	8.800	9.333	9.625	9.333	9.333	9.166
SD	2.108	2.247	2.161	2.244	2.323	2.349
Skewness	-.823	-.997	-1.201	-1.128	-1.066	-1.244

4. Discussion

4.1. Communication skills

While nursing staff has a more favorable opinion of their nursing supervisors' competencies than the supervisors themselves, both staff and supervisors believe that nurse supervisors' communication skills in primary healthcare settings are inadequate. This implies that nursing managers face difficulties maintaining strong communication with their staff, mainly due to their high workload, which can limit

interaction time. Personal communication style or personality traits also exacerbate communication challenges for some supervisors. Several studies have also produced results that imply nursing managers' ineffective communication strategies can contribute to dissatisfaction among their nursing staff (Daradkeh et al., 2022; Fowler et al., 2021).

It is recommended that nurse supervisors encourage open communication with their staff through frequent meetings. Additionally, nurse supervisors should participate in communication training opportunities to develop strategies for

understanding different communication styles and improving their techniques. Finally, nursing managers must recognize effective communication's critical role in promoting patient outcomes, enhancing productivity, and improving staff morale. By leading by example and creating an environment of effective communication, they can encourage best practices at all levels of the organization.

4.2. Financial management skills

The fact that nurse supervisors perceived their financial management skills as their lowest competencies suggests that they have not received the necessary training in budgeting, accounting principles, and financial forecasting. This recent result agrees with several other findings, which pointed out that nurses frequently have insufficient knowledge of financial management (Paarima et al., 2021; Naranjee et al., 2019; Munyewende et al., 2016). It is recommended that nurse supervisors at PHC receive additional training in financial management to ensure that adequate resources are allocated appropriately in their healthcare facility. Training in financial management can also help nurse supervisors make informed decisions about patient care, staffing, and resource allocation, ultimately leading to better patient outcomes.

4.3. Leadership and management

According to a recent study, nursing supervisors have been perceived to demonstrate high competencies in leadership and management. Most of these supervisors have clinical experience of more than five years, which implies that they have acquired significant experience in various roles as a nurse and have gained valuable insights and expertise in managing their staff. This finding is consistent with studies (Munyewende et al., 2016; Ofei et al., 2020) that show nurse managers have strong leadership and management skills.

It is recommended that healthcare institutions provide advanced leadership and management training to nurse managers to deepen their expertise. Nurse supervisors are also encouraged to foster a collaborative culture where leadership and management concepts can be discussed and effectively implemented. This enables them to develop their skills further and improve patient outcomes in their healthcare facility. In addition, experienced nurse leaders could share their knowledge and insights with aspiring supervisors or those needing guidance in specific management areas.

4.4. Human resource management and staff management

Results of the study showed that respondents perceived nurse supervisors to be highly skilled in human resources management and staff

management. As noted earlier, most nurse supervisors who participated in the study worked as nurses for over five years. This experience has allowed them to work in various roles and develop a deep understanding of the healthcare system, particularly regarding managing people. Also, another reason for this research result is the nursing supervisor's ability to establish effective relationships with their staff. This finding is consistent with Munyewende's et al. (2016) assertion that nursing managers in primary healthcare settings effectively manage staff. As a result, it is suggested that nurse supervisors create a mentoring program for less experienced colleagues who want to improve their competencies. While developing new skills and competencies, the mentee can benefit from the mentor's guidance and insights. Investing in team-building activities among team members also promotes collaboration and trust, which increases staff productivity and motivation.

4.5. Planning and priority setting

Based on the survey findings, nursing supervisors are perceived to be highly effective in planning and priority setting. This indicates that these supervisors possess a broad range of comprehensive understanding of primary healthcare principles, familiarity with local healthcare systems, good communication skills with patients, and proficiency in using technology to manage patient data. This recent research contradicts the statement made by Munyewende et al. (2016) regarding nurse managers' skills in planning and priority setting, as they described it as insufficient competency. It is recommended that PHC Nurse Supervisors continue to develop and improve their planning and priority-setting competencies. This includes investing in ongoing training and professional development programs that help them stay updated with the latest evidence-based practices and technological advancements relevant to their role.

4.6. Problem solving skills

Nurse supervisors in this recent study are highly skilled in problem-solving, as perceived by respondents. This shows that nurse supervisors have a comprehensive understanding of PHC principles. Also, supervisors can identify and address issues effectively and work collaboratively with colleagues to enhance the overall quality of care their teams deliver. However, Terzioglu (2006) disagreed with this recent finding, arguing that nurses possess inadequate problem-solving skills. Nonetheless, it was observed that there is an improvement in the situation after nurse supervisors undergo training and education in management and problem-solving skills. It is suggested that healthcare organizations in Saudi Arabia consider implementing regular performance evaluations for their Nurse Supervisors. This will allow for individual areas of strengths and weaknesses to be identified, enabling

tailored training and development opportunities for each Nurse Supervisor to improve their problem-solving skills further. Additionally, encouraging continuous learning through participation in research activities, attending conferences, or enrolling in advanced courses can widen the Nurse Supervisors' knowledge base and improve their critical thinking abilities.

4.7. Combined perceptions of two group

Based on the findings of this study, it can be concluded that the perceptions of nursing staff and nurse supervisors on the performance of their Nurse Supervisors in PHC settings are consistent with their agreement. The study affirms that Nurse Supervisors in PHC demonstrate good leadership skills, problem-solving and critical thinking abilities, commitment to team development, understanding of PHC principles, and continuous learning and development. They establish a welcoming workplace where best practices are exchanged to guarantee high-quality healthcare services that satisfy the various healthcare requirements of the population they serve. The findings of this result contradict the argument made by [Munyewende et al. \(2016\)](#), where subordinates of nurse managers perceived their nurse leaders in their clinical area as having low competency ratings. It is recommended that health institutions continue to promote leadership development at this level by identifying and cultivating talented individuals who can assume leadership positions. This will help establish a pool of competent Nurse Supervisors who are well-equipped to lead effectively, ensuring primary healthcare runs smoothly and continuously. Such an approach emphasizes the significance of developing future nursing leaders and highlights its relevance in achieving long-term sustainability in PHC.

5. Conclusion

The research revealed that, although nursing personnel held their supervisors in high regard regarding competency, there was a mutual consensus among staff and supervisors on the necessity to enhance communication abilities. The financial management acumen of nurse supervisors was deemed inadequate, necessitating further training. Leadership and management capabilities were viewed favorably, particularly amongst those possessing over five years of clinical experience. The implementation of ongoing educational and developmental programs is imperative for the augmentation of nurse supervisor competencies. Such initiatives are instrumental in fostering improved patient care outcomes, elevating productivity, and bolstering staff morale. Moreover, the strategic identification and nurturing of talented individuals through comprehensive training initiatives is crucial in cultivating a reservoir of adept Nurse Supervisors within PHC environments.

Compliance with ethical standards

Ethical considerations

The survey questionnaire was accompanied by an informed consent form sent to the respondents through a Google link. The informed consent provided the participants with information about the purpose of the study and the extent of their participation. The data collection process complied with accepted ethical standards in research. Participants were assured that their responses would be kept confidential and that they had the right to withdraw from the study at any point.

Conflict of interest

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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