Exploring Perceptions of Clinical Leaders Promoting Quality Patient Care on Therapy Teams
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BACKGROUND

Literature is lacking in the implementation and outcomes of occupational therapy leadership. Therapy departments often offer positions of leadership to practitioners who already work for them. However, these roles are sometimes not well-defined, and practitioners often don't know the expectations of clinical leaders until they are in a leadership role. A clear statement that defines the role and expectations of formal and informal leadership from leaders in various positions will educate future clinical leaders to prepare them to assume these roles and influence the quality improvement of therapy teams and patient outcomes.

Purpose

This study was pursued to clearly define the role of clinical leaders on a therapy team. This study also aimed to identify qualities of successful formal and informal leaders that influence patient outcomes.

METHODS

The search strategy for this study included 3 electronic databases. Peer reviewed, published qualitative, quantitative and systematic reviews that examined leadership qualities and related outcomes were included. Analysis of sources was completed to determined recurring themes.
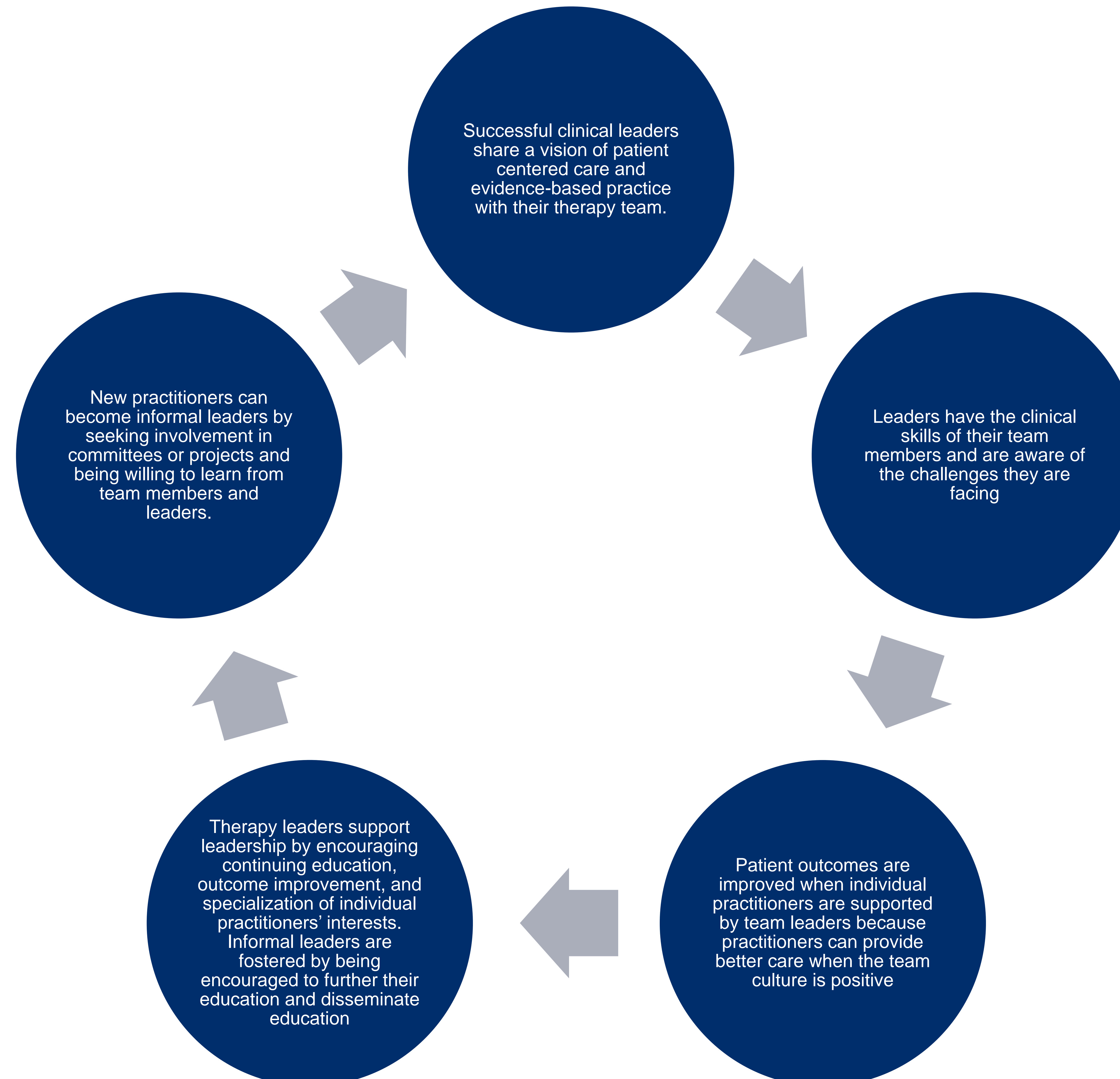
A narrative design using semi-structured interviews was used to explore the perceptions of clinical leaders. Themes identified from the literature search informed the creation of interview questions. Leaders were asked open-ended questions to identify the qualities of leaders, qualities of a culture of leadership, expected outcomes of effective leadership, and how new therapists can pursue leadership in their practice.

Participants were identified from the clinical leadership team at Northern Colorado Rehabilitation Hospital and Long-Term Acute Hospital. Participants included physical and occupational therapists, full-time practicing therapists who fill managerial roles and a full-time manager. Participants have been with the company for 2-14 years and in leadership roles for 3 months to 10 years.

Transcripts were produced from interviews and data from literature review and interviews was triangulated. Patterns and relationships among data were analyzed and themes identified.

RESULTS

(A. Hansen, A. Oestmann, B. Adams, personal communication, February 7, 2020)

Successful clinical leaders share a vision of patient centered care and evidence-based practice with their therapy team.

Leaders have the clinical skills of their team members and are aware of the challenges they are facing

Patient outcomes are improved when individual practitioners are supported by team leaders because practitioners can provide better care when the team culture is positive

Therapy leaders support leadership by encouraging continuing education, outcome improvement, and specialization of individual practitioners' interests. Informal leaders are fostered by being encouraged to further their education and disseminate education

New practitioners can become informal leaders by seeking involvement in committees or projects and being willing to learn from team members and leaders.

LIMITATIONS

The literature surrounding leadership in therapy professions is lacking. While the results of this qualitative study yield a short summary of a small sample of leaders' perceptions, further research is needed to continue defining roles and outcomes of quality therapy leaders.

BOTTOM LINE FOR OT

One of the greatest influences on patient outcomes is direct care from therapy practitioners. Therapy practitioners are affected by team culture which is fostered by clinical leadership. Therapy practitioners can influence their team culture to yield improved patient outcomes through formal and informal leadership. Successful clinical leaders promote quality patient care and improved outcomes in therapy departments.

Occupational therapists (OTs) are well-equipped to serve the therapy department as leaders. In informal roles, occupational therapists are involved in patients' care from evaluation to discharge, allowing OTs to advocate for both patient needs, and therapist needs to promote best practice. In formal leadership roles, OTs can use a holistic approach to consider how team culture influences patient outcomes and foster an environment that values patient-centered care and evidence-based practice.

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