

Interdisciplinary care is essential to solving complex patient needs, increasing a patient's function, and optimizing their quality of life. The needs and care of patients with spinal cord injuries often times require skilled treatment from multiple disciplines. For this to be accomplished, coordinated interdisciplinary care is essential. Effective interdisciplinary care is achieved when disciplines work together and communicate with each other, to optimize care through collaboration and common goal setting. With the needs of the patient at the center of the team's efforts, interdisciplinary care utilizes discipline specific perspectives to optimize outcomes through innovative problem solving and creative solutions.

I have seen first-hand the importance of interdisciplinary care. When interdisciplinary care is not encouraged on a team, team members are less likely to speak up, show less ownership to their job roles and duties, and patient outcomes suffer. Creating a culture of interdisciplinary teamwork takes time, energy, and an ongoing commitment from both leaders and front-line staff. It is necessary that interdisciplinary care is built into workload and workflow to reduce burden and duplication.

To foster interdisciplinary care within a complex team, effective communication, respect, and an understanding of various disciplines is essential. Spinal cord centers need to strive to create environments that not only promote relationships among disciplines to optimize interdisciplinary care, but also strategically plan for collaboration to occur. One way in which spinal cord teams can work together to foster better relationships is through shared orientation opportunities. Structuring new employee orientation in a way that allows employees to not only orientate to their specific discipline, but also allows for planned opportunities to orientate with other team members is key to effective interdisciplinary care.

The goal of this cross discipline orientation is for new employees to have a basic understanding of a variety of disciplines, job tasks and responsibilities, as well as workflow. This orientation could be something as simple as planned job shadowing with follow up discussions to a full day multidiscipline orientation. Understanding patient care from different perspectives allows for opportunities to identify where team members can collaborate on shared goals. In addition, meeting with, talking to and shadowing professionals from other disciplines allows the opportunity to establish professional relationships with a variety of disciplines. Setting up an expectation of collaboration early on helps to break down siloed care by promoting relationships among disciplines. It also encourages communication and interactions among disciplines when challenges are identified.

As a new employee (2 years) to a spinal cord center, I remember the intimidation of a large team. At my time of hire, there was only discipline specific orientation, therefore, it took time to meet other disciplines, learn their roles, and determine strategies to optimize collaboration. Having a SCI specific team orientation/job shadowing would have been extremely beneficial for me to learn the role of the whole team and understand occupational therapy's role within the whole puzzle. In addition, I believe I would have been more willing to advocate and collaborate on challenging solutions if I knew the team members. Over the last two years, job shadowing opportunities have been created at my job and I have noticed a significant improvement in interdisciplinary collaboration to address real time patient challenges or concerns. I have also noticed more positive relationships between teams and team members.

Optimizing orientation that encourages collaboration is the first step in creating a culture of interdisciplinary care. Orientation is the foundation, but orientation alone it is not enough. Additional recommendations include creating multi-disciplinary committees of front-line staff. For example, a therapy/nursing committee allows planned opportunities for floor nurses and therapists to assess processes, discuss patients with challenging needs, promote efficiency, and allow for ongoing relationship building.

With multiple disciplines meeting in sub-committees, daily challenges that interfere with optimal practices can be assessed and multiple lenses can be involved when discussing and agreeing upon solutions. When multiple disciplines come together to problem solve next steps, those agreed upon next steps have increased buy in from team members. This often leads to more successful implementation and carry over. In addition, solutions that take into consideration multiple viewpoints are often sounder and provide for more concrete solutions. Utilizing this approach can limit the number of modifications and changes needed. Procedures that allow multiple disciplines to communicate regularly are essential to creating effective organizational processes for interdisciplinary care.

Working on a sub-committee as part of an interdisciplinary team, I have seen a variety of positive initiatives come from the group. The initiatives are focused on improving rehabilitation for patients and quality of care. Because of the nature in which these initiatives are created, they often have significant buy in, and implementation is smooth because of front line champions of the ideas. Meeting on a regular basis and agreeing upon next steps is essential to continue to address opportunities in real time.

It is essential spinal cord centers continue to devote resources and energy to promote interdisciplinary care. Optimal interdisciplinary care will increase patient outcomes and staff relationships/teamwork.