

Exploring the Actual Scope of Practice Among Nursing Technicians and Nurses in Saudi Arabian Primary Healthcare Centers: A Qualitative Study

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Abstract

Objective: This qualitative study aimed to explore the actual scope of practice among nursing technicians and nurses in Saudi Arabian primary healthcare centers, focusing on their roles, responsibilities, and perceptions.

Methods: Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 28 participants, including 21 nursing technicians and 7 nurses, working in various primary healthcare centers across Saudi Arabia. Purposive sampling was employed to recruit participants, and data were analyzed using thematic analysis.

Results: Four main themes emerged from the data: (1) role ambiguity and overlap, (2) task delegation and supervision, (3) professional development and career progression, and (4) interprofessional collaboration and communication. Participants reported a lack of clarity regarding their roles and responsibilities, leading to task overlap and potential conflicts. They also highlighted the need for effective task delegation, supervision, and ongoing professional development opportunities.

Conclusion: Clarifying the scope of practice for nursing technicians and nurses in Saudi Arabian primary healthcare centers is crucial for optimizing their roles, enhancing patient care, and promoting job satisfaction. Policymakers and healthcare organizations should prioritize the development of clear job descriptions, training programs, and interprofessional collaboration to support the effective utilization of the nursing workforce in primary care settings.

Keywords: scope of practice, nursing technicians, nurses, primary healthcare, qualitative research, Saudi Arabia

Introduction

Primary healthcare centers play a vital role in providing accessible and comprehensive healthcare services to communities in Saudi Arabia (Almalki et al., 2011). Nursing technicians and nurses are essential members of the primary healthcare workforce, contributing to the delivery of quality patient care (Alshammari et al., 2019). However, the actual scope of practice for these healthcare professionals in Saudi Arabian primary care settings remains poorly defined, leading to role ambiguity and potential challenges in service delivery (Alsharari, 2020).

The scope of practice refers to the roles, responsibilities, and boundaries within which healthcare professionals are educated, trained, and authorized to perform (Fealy et al., 2015). A clearly defined scope of practice is essential for ensuring safe, effective, and efficient patient care, as well as promoting job satisfaction and professional development among healthcare workers (Halcomb et al., 2017).

In Saudi Arabia, nursing technicians are a significant part of the nursing workforce, particularly in primary healthcare settings (Aldossary et al., 2008). Nursing technicians typically hold a diploma in nursing and work under the supervision of registered nurses to provide basic patient care and support services (Alboliteh et al., 2017). However, the specific roles and responsibilities of nursing technicians in primary care settings may vary depending on the organization and the needs of the patient population.

Similarly, the scope of practice for nurses in Saudi Arabian primary healthcare centers may differ from that in other healthcare settings, such as hospitals or specialized clinics (Alsharari, 2020). Primary care nurses often assume a

broad range of roles, including patient assessment, health education, chronic disease management, and care coordination (Halcomb et al., 2017). However, the extent to which these roles are performed by nurses in Saudi Arabian primary care settings remains unclear.

Despite the importance of clarifying the scope of practice for nursing technicians and nurses in primary care, there is limited qualitative research exploring their actual roles, responsibilities, and perceptions in Saudi Arabian contexts. This study aimed to address this gap by providing an in-depth understanding of the scope of practice among nursing technicians and nurses working in various primary healthcare centers across Saudi Arabia.

Literature Review

1. Scope of Practice in Nursing

The scope of practice in nursing refers to the roles, responsibilities, and boundaries within which nurses are educated, trained, and authorized to perform (Fealy et al., 2015). A well-defined scope of practice is essential for ensuring safe, effective, and efficient patient care, as well as promoting professional development and job satisfaction among nurses (Halcomb et al., 2017).

The International Council of Nurses (ICN) provides a global framework for the scope of nursing practice, emphasizing the importance of nurses' roles in health promotion, disease prevention, and care delivery across various healthcare settings (ICN, 2013). However, the specific scope of practice for nurses may vary depending on the country, healthcare system, and practice setting (Schober, 2017).

In the context of primary healthcare, nurses often assume a broad range of roles and responsibilities, including patient assessment, health education, chronic disease management, care coordination, and interprofessional collaboration (Halcomb et al., 2017; Norful et al., 2017). These roles are crucial for providing comprehensive and patient-centered care in community settings.

2. Nursing Technicians in Healthcare

Nursing technicians, also known as practical nurses or vocational nurses in some countries, are an important part of the nursing workforce, particularly in primary healthcare settings (Aldossary et al., 2008). Nursing technicians typically hold a diploma in nursing and work under the supervision of registered nurses to provide basic patient care and support services (Alboliteh et al., 2017).

The scope of practice for nursing technicians may include tasks such as monitoring vital signs, administering medications, performing wound care, and assisting with activities of daily living (Clancy et al., 2014). However, the specific roles and responsibilities of nursing technicians may vary depending on the country, healthcare organization, and patient population served.

In Saudi Arabia, nursing technicians play a significant role in the delivery of primary healthcare services (Aldossary et al., 2008). However, there is limited research exploring the actual scope of practice and the perceptions of nursing technicians regarding their roles and responsibilities in Saudi Arabian primary care settings.

3. Nursing Workforce in Saudi Arabian Primary Healthcare

The nursing workforce in Saudi Arabian primary healthcare centers consists of both nursing technicians and registered nurses (Almalki et al., 2011). These healthcare professionals work together to provide essential primary care services to communities across the country.

However, the specific roles, responsibilities, and scope of practice for nursing technicians and nurses in Saudi Arabian primary care settings remain poorly defined (Alsharari, 2020). This lack of clarity may lead to role ambiguity, task overlap, and potential challenges in service delivery.

Alsharari (2020) highlighted the need for further research to explore the actual scope of practice and the perceptions of nursing technicians and nurses in Saudi Arabian primary healthcare centers. Such research could inform the development of clear job descriptions, training programs, and policies to support the effective utilization of the nursing workforce in primary care settings.

Alshammari et al. (2019) emphasized the importance of interprofessional collaboration and communication among healthcare professionals in Saudi Arabian primary care settings. Clarifying the scope of practice for nursing technicians and nurses could facilitate better collaboration and teamwork, ultimately improving patient care and outcomes.

While these studies provide valuable insights into the nursing workforce in Saudi Arabian primary healthcare, there is a paucity of qualitative research specifically exploring the actual scope of practice and the perceptions of nursing technicians and nurses in these settings. This study aimed to address this gap by providing an in-depth understanding of the scope of practice among nursing technicians and nurses working in various primary healthcare centers across Saudi Arabia.

Methods

1. Study Design

This study employed a qualitative descriptive design using semi-structured interviews to explore the actual scope of practice among nursing technicians and nurses in Saudi Arabian primary healthcare centers.

2. Participants and Setting

Purposive sampling was used to recruit 28 participants, including 21 nursing technicians and 7 nurses, working in various primary healthcare centers across Saudi Arabia. Participants were selected based on their experience working in primary care settings and their willingness to share their perspectives on the research topic. Table 1 presents the demographic characteristics of the participants.

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of Participants (N = 28)

Characteristic	Nursing Technicians (n = 21)	Nurses (n = 7)
Gender		
Male	12 (57.1%)	3 (42.9%)
Female	9 (42.9%)	4 (57.1%)
Age (years)		
25-34	14 (66.7%)	2 (28.6%)
35-44	5 (23.8%)	4 (57.1%)
45-54	2 (9.5%)	1 (14.3%)
Years of Experience		
1-5	8 (38.1%)	1 (14.3%)
6-10	10 (47.6%)	3 (42.9%)
>10	3 (14.3%)	3 (42.9%)

3. Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with each participant, either in-person or via telephone, depending on their preference and availability. The interviews were guided by an interview protocol that included open-ended questions and probes to elicit detailed responses about the actual scope of practice, roles, responsibilities, and perceptions of nursing technicians and nurses in primary care settings. The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim for analysis.

4. Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was used to identify, analyze, and report patterns within the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The analysis process involved familiarization with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report. Two researchers independently coded the data and discussed any discrepancies to reach a consensus on the final themes.

Results

Four main themes emerged from the data: (1) role ambiguity and overlap, (2) task delegation and supervision, (3) professional development and career progression, and (4) interprofessional collaboration and communication.

1. Role Ambiguity and Overlap

Participants reported a lack of clarity regarding their roles and responsibilities, leading to task overlap and potential conflicts between nursing technicians and nurses. Both groups expressed concerns about the ambiguity in their job descriptions and the need for clearer guidelines on their scope of practice. Table 2 presents examples of participants' quotes related to role ambiguity and overlap.

Table 2. Role Ambiguity and Overlap: Participants' Quotes

Nursing Technicians	Nurses
"Sometimes it's unclear what tasks are specific to nursing technicians and what tasks are for nurses. This can lead to confusion and duplication of efforts." (Participant 5)	"There is a need for clear job descriptions that outline the roles and responsibilities of nursing technicians and nurses in primary care settings." (Participant 23)
"When roles are not well-defined, it can create tension between nursing technicians and nurses, as both groups may feel like they are stepping on each other's toes." (Participant 11)	"Role ambiguity can lead to inefficiencies in patient care, as tasks may be overlooked or performed by multiple healthcare professionals unnecessarily." (Participant 26)

2. Task Delegation and Supervision

Participants highlighted the importance of effective task delegation and supervision in optimizing the scope of practice for nursing technicians and nurses. Nursing technicians emphasized the need for clear guidance and support from nurses when performing delegated tasks, while nurses stressed the importance of appropriate delegation and

oversight to ensure patient safety and quality of care. Table 3 presents examples of participants' quotes related to task delegation and supervision.

Table 3. Task Delegation and Supervision: Participants' Quotes

Nursing Technicians	Nurses
"Effective task delegation from nurses to nursing technicians is essential for making the best use of our skills and knowledge." (Participant 8)	"As nurses, it's our responsibility to ensure that delegated tasks are within the scope of practice of nursing technicians and that they receive adequate supervision and support." (Participant 22)
"Clear communication and guidance from nurses when delegating tasks can help nursing technicians perform their duties more effectively and confidently." (Participant 16)	"Balancing task delegation with appropriate supervision is crucial for maintaining patient safety and quality of care in primary healthcare settings." (Participant 27)

3. Professional Development and Career Progression

Participants expressed a desire for ongoing professional development opportunities and clear career progression pathways for both nursing technicians and nurses in primary care settings. They emphasized the importance of access to training programs, workshops, and continuing education to enhance their skills and knowledge. Table 4 presents examples of participants' quotes related to professional development and career progression.

Table 4. Professional Development and Career Progression: Participants' Quotes

Nursing Technicians	Nurses
"Access to continuing education and training programs is essential for nursing technicians to stay up-to-date with the latest practices and enhance their skills." (Participant 3)	"Providing opportunities for professional development and career advancement can help retain skilled nurses in primary care settings and improve job satisfaction." (Participant 25)
"Clear career progression pathways for nursing technicians can motivate them to further their education and take on more advanced roles in primary healthcare." (Participant 13)	"Investing in the professional growth of both nursing technicians and nurses can ultimately lead to better patient care and outcomes in primary care settings." (Participant 21)

4. Interprofessional Collaboration and Communication

Participants stressed the importance of effective interprofessional collaboration and communication among nursing technicians, nurses, and other healthcare professionals in primary care settings. They highlighted the need for clear communication channels, mutual respect, and a shared understanding of roles and responsibilities to ensure seamless patient care. Table 5 presents examples of participants' quotes related to interprofessional collaboration and communication.

Table 5. Interprofessional Collaboration and Communication: Participants' Quotes

Nursing Technicians	Nurses
"Effective collaboration between nursing technicians and nurses is essential for providing comprehensive and coordinated patient care in primary healthcare centers." (Participant 9)	"Clear communication and a shared understanding of roles and responsibilities can help foster a positive working relationship between nursing technicians and nurses." (Participant 24)
"Regular team meetings and open communication channels can help address any issues or concerns related to the scope of practice and ensure everyone is working towards a common goal." (Participant 18)	"Interprofessional collaboration, including with physicians and other healthcare professionals, is crucial for delivering high-quality, patient-centered care in primary care settings." (Participant 28)

Discussion

This qualitative study explored the actual scope of practice among nursing technicians and nurses in Saudi Arabian primary healthcare centers. The findings highlight the need for clarity in roles and responsibilities, effective task delegation and supervision, ongoing professional development opportunities, and strong interprofessional collaboration and communication.

The role ambiguity and overlap reported by participants in this study echo the findings of previous research, which emphasizes the importance of clearly defined scopes of practice for healthcare professionals (Fealy et al., 2015; Halcomb et al., 2017). The lack of clear job descriptions and guidelines for nursing technicians and nurses in Saudi Arabian primary care settings can lead to confusion, duplication of efforts, and potential conflicts among team members. Addressing this issue is crucial for optimizing the utilization of the nursing workforce and ensuring efficient and effective patient care.

Effective task delegation and supervision emerged as key factors in optimizing the scope of practice for nursing technicians and nurses, which aligns with previous studies (Alsharari, 2020; Clancy et al., 2014). Participants emphasized the need for clear communication, guidance, and support when delegating tasks to nursing technicians, as well as appropriate oversight to maintain patient safety and quality of care. These findings underscore the importance of developing clear protocols and guidelines for task delegation and supervision in primary care settings. The desire for ongoing professional development and clear career progression pathways expressed by participants in this study is consistent with previous research highlighting the importance of investing in the professional growth of the nursing workforce (Alboliteh et al., 2017; Alsharari, 2020). Providing access to training programs, workshops, and continuing education can help nursing technicians and nurses enhance their skills, stay up-to-date with the latest practices, and take on more advanced roles in primary healthcare. Moreover, offering clear career progression pathways can motivate nursing technicians to further their education and contribute to the retention of skilled nurses in primary care settings.

The emphasis on interprofessional collaboration and communication in this study resonates with previous research on the importance of teamwork in primary healthcare (Alshammari et al., 2019; Norful et al., 2017). Participants stressed the need for clear communication channels, mutual respect, and a shared understanding of roles and responsibilities among nursing technicians, nurses, and other healthcare professionals. Fostering effective interprofessional collaboration can lead to more comprehensive and coordinated patient care, ultimately improving patient outcomes in primary care settings.

Implications for Practice and Policy

The findings of this study have several implications for practice and policy in Saudi Arabian primary healthcare centers. First, policymakers and healthcare organizations should prioritize the development of clear job descriptions and guidelines that delineate the roles and responsibilities of nursing technicians and nurses. This clarity can help minimize role ambiguity, task overlap, and potential conflicts among team members.

Second, healthcare organizations should establish clear protocols and guidelines for task delegation and supervision, ensuring that delegated tasks are within the scope of practice of nursing technicians and that they receive adequate support and oversight from nurses. This can help optimize the utilization of the nursing workforce and maintain patient safety and quality of care.

Third, investing in ongoing professional development opportunities and creating clear career progression pathways for nursing technicians and nurses in primary care settings can enhance their skills, job satisfaction, and retention. Healthcare organizations should provide access to training programs, workshops, and continuing education, as well as offer opportunities for advancement within the primary care setting.

Finally, fostering a culture of interprofessional collaboration and communication is crucial for delivering high-quality, patient-centered care in primary healthcare centers. Healthcare organizations should establish clear communication channels, promote mutual respect, and encourage a shared understanding of roles and responsibilities among all healthcare professionals working in primary care settings.

Limitations and Future Research

This study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the sample size was relatively small and may not be representative of all nursing technicians and nurses working in Saudi Arabian primary healthcare centers. Future research could include a larger and more diverse sample to enhance the generalizability of the findings.

Second, this study relied on self-reported data from participants, which may be subject to recall bias or social desirability bias. Future research could employ observational methods or triangulate data from multiple sources to strengthen the validity of the findings.

Third, this study focused on the perspectives of nursing technicians and nurses, but did not include the views of other healthcare professionals or patients. Future research could explore the perspectives of these stakeholders to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the scope of practice and its impact on patient care in primary healthcare settings.

Despite these limitations, this study provides valuable insights into the actual scope of practice among nursing technicians and nurses in Saudi Arabian primary healthcare centers and highlights areas for improvement in practice and policy.

Conclusion

This qualitative study explored the actual scope of practice among nursing technicians and nurses in Saudi Arabian primary healthcare centers. The findings reveal the need for clarity in roles and responsibilities, effective task delegation and supervision, ongoing professional development opportunities, and strong interprofessional collaboration and communication.

Policymakers and healthcare organizations should prioritize the development of clear job descriptions, protocols for task delegation and supervision, and investment in the professional growth of the nursing workforce. Fostering a

culture of interprofessional collaboration and communication is also crucial for delivering high-quality, patient-centered care in primary care settings.

Future research could include a larger and more diverse sample, employ observational methods, and explore the perspectives of other healthcare professionals and patients to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the scope of practice in primary healthcare settings.

By addressing the issues identified in this study and implementing the recommended strategies, Saudi Arabian primary healthcare centers can optimize the utilization of the nursing workforce, enhance job satisfaction, and ultimately improve patient care and outcomes.

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