The role of volunteers in improving rehabilitation patients' experiences and outcomes.

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\textbf{Introduction:} Volunteers are an essential part of the Canadian health care system. In 2013, 12.7 million Canadians or 44\% of people aged 15 years and older participated in some form of volunteer work, and 12\% of those individuals donated time to health related organizations and activities. Hospitals have come to rely on volunteers for a variety of tasks and services, but there are varying perceptions about volunteers’ place within the health care team. This study aimed to understand the role of volunteers in stroke rehabilitation, as well as the barriers to volunteer engagement within the stroke rehabilitation team.

\textbf{Methods:} An exploratory case study was conducted within a complex rehabilitation hospital in Ontario, Canada. Sixty clinicians, hospital administrators and volunteers participated in focus groups and interviews. Organizational document pertaining to volunteer management were retrieved and analyzed.

\textbf{Results:} While there is support for volunteer engagement in stroke rehabilitation, with a wide range of activities for volunteers, several barriers to volunteer engagement in inpatient stroke rehabilitation were identified. These barriers relate to unionization, patient safety and confidentiality, volunteer attendance, and lack of collaboration between clinical and volunteer resource department. Interpreting the results with an interprofessional practice lens, this study presents how these barriers could be addressed through improving role clarity for volunteers.

\textbf{Conclusions:} Although there are a number of barriers to engagement of volunteers in stroke rehabilitation, an interprofessional approach, specifically emphasizing and addressing issues related to key role clarity, may mediate these barriers. Clarity surrounding the status of volunteers in hospital settings could necessitate more appropriate workforce planning and administration that account for their role in health care services.

\textbf{Limitations:} As this was an exploratory case study, focused on a single case, the study results may have limited transferability. However, building upon an interprofessional concept (role clarity), and providing a rich description of the case, is intended to enhance credibility, and support transferability of results and by audience members to their own practice contexts.

\textbf{Future research:} Additional research focused on the barriers to volunteer engagement on clinical teams is required to determine the nature of the barriers themselves--whether they are structural, institutional, cultural, or personal. This type of analysis could support the development of strategies to reduce and remove barriers to volunteer optimization.
Keywords: case study; interprofessional collaboration; professional boundaries; role clarity; volunteers