




# Health Communication: in the Voice of Hospitalized Patients

Sonia Prates de Souza<sup>1</sup>  
 [orcid.org/0009-0004-6699-2505](https://orcid.org/0009-0004-6699-2505)

Leticia Botelho da Silva<sup>2</sup>  
 [orcid.org/0009-0008-6148-6522](https://orcid.org/0009-0008-6148-6522)

Daielle Vitória de Lima da Rosa<sup>3</sup>  
 [orcid.org/0009-0006-5354-4513](https://orcid.org/0009-0006-5354-4513)

Gabriele Caroline Sposito Ferreira<sup>4</sup>  
 [orcid.org/0009-0000-1069-7241](https://orcid.org/0009-0000-1069-7241)

Gislene Aparecida Xavier dos Reis<sup>5</sup>  
 [orcid.org/0000-0002-6232-1905](https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6232-1905)

<sup>1</sup>Nursing student. Centro Universitário Ingá, Maringá-PR, Brazil.

<sup>2</sup>Nursing student. Centro Universitário Ingá, Maringá-PR, Brazil.

<sup>3</sup>Nursing student. Centro Universitário Ingá, Maringá-PR, Brazil.

<sup>4</sup>Nursing student. Centro Universitário Ingá, Maringá-PR, Brazil.

<sup>5</sup>PhD in Nursing. Centro Universitário Ingá, Maringá-PR, Brazil.

## Abstract

### Introduction

Health communication plays a crucial role in the therapeutic process for patients in inpatient units. It is essential developing a strong bond between healthcare professionals, patients, and/or their companions. Poor communication can lead to treatment complications, affecting the patient and the healthcare team.

### Objective

To investigate patients' perceptions of health communication.

### Methods

This study used a quantitative approach with patients over 18 hospitalized for more than 24 hours in a high-complexity hospital in the northwest region of Paraná, Brazil.

### Results

A total of 98 patients participated, 58% of whom were women, with an average age of 66,4 years and 6,6 years of education. The average length of hospital stay was four days. Patients rated communication as satisfactory with the medical team (93,9%) and nursing staff (96,9%), 63,3% understood the reasons for laboratory tests, and 77,6% were questioned about allergic reactions. Areas identified for improvement include scheduled treatment (16,3%), the need for laboratory tests (59,2%), and information about possible medication side effects (31,6%).

### Conclusion

Patients' perceptions of communication were generally positive. However, we identified some weaknesses that could lead to care failures.

### Keywords

Health Communication; Medical Assistance Team; Nursing Team; Patient Perspective.

#### Corresponding author:

Sonia Prates de Souza

**E-mail:** [soniapratesouza@hotmail.com](mailto:soniapratesouza@hotmail.com)

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## Introduction

Communication is a fundamental skill in healthcare settings, directly influencing the quality of care and enabling a humanizing approach to patient care.<sup>1</sup> Poor communication can lead to anxiety, fear, distrust, and non-adherence to treatment among patients and their families,<sup>2</sup> while also weakening the relationship and bond between healthcare professionals and patients.<sup>3</sup> Communication must be individualized, addressing each patient's needs and expectations, and should be clear and understandable, using accessible language.<sup>4</sup>

According to Trindade,<sup>5</sup> patients' perceptions in a hospital setting are evaluated through three components: 1) technical, which relates to elements involved in healthcare delivery, such as the appropriateness of care, scientific advancements, and professionals' abilities; 2) interpersonal, which refers to the professional-patient relationship, conveying information with kindness and ethics; and 3) comfort, which pertains to the conditions provided in a healthcare unit, enabling patients to feel at ease. Addressing doubts, listening, engaging in dialogue, and promoting autonomy through self-care improve the hospital experience and significantly enhance patient care. However, there are also barriers to overcome.<sup>5</sup>

Santos<sup>6</sup> identifies inadequate communication as one of the main causes of adverse events, serving as the primary factor behind poor-quality patient care. Clear and objective communication can promote high-quality care, reducing the occurrence of preventable and undesirable harm. This communication must be effective among healthcare professionals and between professionals and patients/companions.<sup>6</sup> Numerous factors can affect communication quality, including human factors like communication breakdowns among caregivers, interruptions, failures or deficits in established clinical protocols, neglect in care, and inadequate communication systems.<sup>7</sup>

Evidence also indicates that nonverbal communication is crucial in healthcare communication, conveying emotions and feelings that patients and companions can interpret.<sup>8</sup> Empathy and sensitivity from healthcare professionals are equally important in communication, as patients need to feel welcomed and understood.<sup>9</sup> Thus, studying effective communication between patients and nursing staff can contribute to improving healthcare quality by utilizing best communication practices, active listening techniques, constructive feedback, and conflict resolution.

Given this context, our study addresses the following research question: What is the patient's perception of health communication? To answer this question, we aim to investigate patients' perceptions of health communication.

## Methods

We conducted an exploratory, descriptive study using a quantitative approach in a high-complexity public hospital within the surgical and medical clinic units. The study took place from June 26, 2023, to July 31, 2023, involving hospitalized patients from these units.

We interviewed patients at their bedside using a 37-question survey developed by the authors, which included sociodemographic data such as sex, age, reason for admission, and length of stay. Additionally, 33 questions focused on health communication, covering topics like medication, imaging and laboratory tests, medical diagnoses, and nursing care.

We included patients over 18 years old who had been hospitalized for at least 24 hours in the surgical and medical clinics. We excluded patients with cognitive impairments, diagnosed psychological disorders, or those under contact, droplet, aerosol, or surveillance isolation at the time of the interview.

Before data collection, we informed participants about the study's objectives, data collection methods, and voluntary nature, addressing any questions. After obtaining verbal consent, we requested participants to sign the Informed Consent Form, leaving one copy with the patient and retaining another with the research team. We analyzed the data using relative and absolute frequency.

We adhered to all ethical guidelines for research involving human subjects, and the Research Ethics Committee approved the study under approval number 6.133.311.

## Results

The study included 98 patients, of whom 56 (58%) were women. The mean age was 66,4 years (SD = 19,29; median = 71; min/max: 21/98) and the average education was 6,68 years (SD = 5,49; median = 5). Forty-three patients (44%) self-identified as white, and 49 (50%) were admitted to the medical clinic unit, with an average hospital stay of four days (SD = 3,51; median = 3).

As shown in Table 1, the most common reasons for hospitalization were diseases of the respiratory system (n=41; 41,84%), digestive system (n=18; 18,37%), and genitourinary system (n=14; 14,29%).

**Table 1 – Reasons for hospitalization by chapter of the International Classification of Diseases (ICD-10) among patients admitted to surgical and medical clinics. Paraná, Brazil – 2023.**

Chapter – CID 10	n	% ≅
Chapter X - Diseases of the respiratory system	41	41,8
Chapter XI - Diseases of the digestive system	18	18,4
Chapter XIV – Diseases of the genitourinary system	14	14,3
Chapter XII - Diseases of the skin and subcutaneous tissue	11	11,2
Chapter VI - Diseases of the nervous system	06	6,1
Chapter IX - Diseases of the circulatory system	06	6,1
Chapter IV - Endocrine, nutritional and metabolic diseases	02	2,0

≅ Approximate value. Source: Authors’ data, 2023.

In terms of communication with the medical team, most patients felt comfortable asking questions (n=92; 93,9%) and expressing their feelings (n=91; 92,9%). However, as

shown in Table 2, there was a noted weakness in understanding the scheduled treatment (n=16; 16,3%).

**Table 2 – Patient perception of communication with the medical team during hospitalization. Paraná, Brazil - 2023.**

Analyzed variables	Yes		No	
	n	% ≅	n	% ≅
Information about the reason for hospitalization	89	90,8	09	9,2
Understanding of the reason for hospitalization	88	89,8	10	10,2
Information about the treatment to be administered	84	85,7	14	14,2
Understanding of the treatment information	82	83,7	16	16,3
Felt comfortable asking questions	92	93,9	06	6,1
Felt comfortable expressing feelings	91	92,9	07	7,1
Received the attention they expected	90	91,8	08	8,2

≅ Approximate value. Source: Authors’ data, 2023.

Regarding patients’ perceptions of communication with the nursing team, the vast majority reported feeling attended to

(n=95; 96,9%) and comfortable expressing their feelings (n=92; 93,9%), as shown in Table 3.

**Table 3 – Patient perception of communication with the nursing team during hospitalization. Paraná, Brazil - 2023.**

Analyzed variables	Yes		No	
	n	% ≅	n	% ≅
Information about the necessary care for treatment	80	81,6	18	18,4
Understanding of the care provided	80	81,6	18	18,4
Felt comfortable expressing feelings	92	9,9	06	6,1
Received the attention they expected	95	96,9	03	3,1

≅ Approximate value. Source: Authors’ data, 2023.

As for the communication related to laboratory and imaging tests, we observed that information about the reasons for laboratory tests (n=62; 63,3%), X-rays (n=47; 47,9%), and CT scans (n=50; 51%) was predominantly

conveyed. However, patient understanding did not match this proportion, with lower comprehension rates (n=58; 59,2%, n=46; 46,9%, n=48; 48,9%) respectively, as presented in Table 4.

**Table 4 - Patient perception of communication during laboratory and imaging exams. Paraná, Brazil - 2023.**

Analyzed variables	Yes		No		Not applicable	
	n	% ≅	n	% ≅	n	% ≅
Information about the reason for laboratory tests	62	63,3	28	28,6	08	8,2
Understanding of the reason for laboratory tests	58	59,2	30	30,6	10	10,2
Information about the reason for X-rays	47	47,9	11	11,2	40	40,8
Understanding of the reason for X-rays	46	46,9	12	12,2	40	40,8
Information about the reason for CT scans	50	51,0	08	8,2	40	40,8
Understanding of the reason for CT scans	48	48,9	08	8,2	42	42,9

≅ Approximate value. Source: Authors’ data, 2023

Concerning the communication received during the medication administration process, participants reported being asked about allergic reactions (n=76; 77,6%).

However, they were not frequently informed about possible medication side effects (n=31; 31,6%), as shown in Table 5.

**Table 5** - Patient perception of communication during medication administration. Paraná, Brazil - 2023.

Analyzed variables	Yes		No		Not applicable	
	n	% $\cong$	n	% $\cong$	n	% $\cong$
Information about new medication prescriptions	59	60,2	32	32,7	07	7,1
Information about medication discontinuation	34	34,7	41	41,8	23	23,5
Questions about allergic reactions to medications	76	77,6	22	22,4	--	--
Information about the medication's name before administration	70	71,4	28	28,6	--	--
Information about the medication's purpose	72	73,5	26	26,5	--	--
Information about possible side effects of the medication	31	31,6	66	67,3	01	1,0
Presented doubts related to medication administration	18	18,4	80	81,6	--	--
Felt comfortable resolving doubts related to medication administration	82	83,7	14	14,3	02	2,0

$\cong$  Approximate value. Source: Authors' data, 2023

Participants identified several key pieces of information they wished to receive from the nursing team, including updates on their clinical progression, explanations of vital sign measurements, guidance on home and hospital care, positive affirmations about their treatment, test results, and discharge plans. They also emphasized the importance of the nursing team listening attentively to their concerns.

Concerning the communication with the medical team, patients highlighted the importance of being informed about the duration of antibiotic use during hospitalization, their clinical progression, hospital discharge plans, treatment duration, the possibility of a cure for their condition, detailed explanations about their disease and required treatment, referrals for social support, and receiving truthful information in a comprehensible language. They also expressed a desire for more frequent conversations with the medical team.

## Discussion

According to the User Rights Charter of the Unified Health System, all citizens have the right to receive clear, objective, respectful, and comprehensible information about their health.<sup>10</sup> Health communication serves as a cornerstone for providing quality care. Effective communication between patients and healthcare professionals fosters bonding, improving treatment adherence and reducing the likelihood of adverse events.<sup>6</sup>

In this study, we observed satisfactory results regarding communication with the medical team, aligning with the findings of Witiski,<sup>11</sup> who reported that these professionals understand that effective communication leads to safer patient care, while its absence can result in care failures.

Most patients in our study expressed satisfaction with the care received during their hospital visit. Similarly, in a study that evaluated hospitalized patients' perceptions of the medical team in a university hospital, patients reported satisfaction and feeling understood through special attention given to their symptoms and during physical exams.<sup>12</sup>

Conversely, other research identified a communication gap between doctors and patients, highlighting the importance of incorporating communication skills training into medical education to enhance this critical competency, resulting in more humanized care.<sup>13</sup>

Our study also found that patients felt comfortable expressing their feelings to the medical team, demonstrating an effective process of communication, which is consistent with findings from another study. Additionally, research has shown that effective communication regarding diagnosis and therapeutic conduct fosters trust, contributing to collaborative care planning.<sup>12</sup>

However, some patients reported weaknesses in the information provided about treatment and difficulties understanding the information conveyed by the professional. In a study aiming to assess hospitalized patients' perceptions of communication with surgeons and physicians in a university hospital, patients expressed dissatisfaction due to using incomprehensible technical terms and insufficient information.<sup>13</sup> Similar findings were reported in Corrêa's study, where patients felt dissatisfied with the lack of information provided.<sup>14</sup>

Regarding the medical team's performance, patients generally reported receiving the attention they expected, considering factors such as attention, respect, empathy, and sensitivity to their complaints and situations. Another study concluded that the physician-patient relationship was strengthened because professionals sensitively addressed patients' reported needs and problems, leading to satisfaction with the care received.<sup>12</sup>

Participants indicated a positive perception of communication with the nursing team during hospitalization. Effective communication from the nursing team regarding procedures, interventions, and treatment plans is crucial for patients to understand and actively participate in their care.<sup>15</sup> Patients who do not receive adequate information may struggle to understand the importance of certain care practices and feel less involved in their treatment process.<sup>16</sup>

We infer that these positive results stem from patients' understanding of the care provided, feeling comfortable expressing their feelings, and receiving the attention they expected. These factors contribute to emotional well-being, reduced stress, and anxiety associated with hospitalization.<sup>16</sup> Moreover, we believe that the nursing team responsible for caring for the patients in this study strives to listen and respond to patients' needs, which is fundamental for building a relationship of trust and mutual respect.<sup>16</sup>

Regarding communication during laboratory and imaging tests, we observed generally positive evaluations of this process. A similar study found that 93,6% of participants understood the reason for their tests.<sup>16</sup> It is important to note that hospitalization often puts patients in a vulnerable state, where undergoing tests can create a sense of being cared for, blending genuine understanding of the need for the test with passive acceptance.<sup>17</sup>

Understanding the purpose of tests is a crucial aspect of effective communication, as effective communication is not something tangible, requiring commitment from the healthcare professional involved.<sup>17</sup> Another study showed that effective communication also demands that professionals are willing to engage with patients.<sup>18</sup> This engagement enhances patient satisfaction, fosters treatment acceptance, and contributes to patient safety and the provision of high-quality care.<sup>1</sup>

More than half of the patients who underwent CT scans reported receiving information about the procedure, which is a favorable outcome. As information availability increases, patients gain more knowledge about the care they receive.<sup>17</sup> This understanding enables patients to develop appropriate perceptions and fosters effective communication between patients and healthcare professionals.<sup>10</sup>

In terms of communication during the medication process, we mostly found positive results in patient reports. However, areas for improvement include the lack of information about medication discontinuation. Inadequate or absent communication within the multidisciplinary team is one of the greatest deficiencies affecting care quality, directly impacting the safety of patients and healthcare providers.<sup>19</sup>

A lack of information can lead to adverse events related to care,<sup>20</sup> making it crucial to ensure accurate and appropriate communication.<sup>21</sup> Medication prescriptions are medical documents created based on patient needs and treatment plans,<sup>22</sup> and the nursing staff administers medications. When they are discontinued, this must be communicated to the patient to ensure safe care.

Our findings emphasize that health communication goes beyond merely transmitting information; it involves understanding, empathy, and building trust between patients and healthcare teams. Improving communication in all these aspects is essential for ensuring effective, safe, and patient-centered care. The areas for improvement identified in this study provide a clear path for interventions that can transform patient experiences and healthcare quality.

From this study, we recognize the need to consider cultural and linguistic barriers in health communication. In a high-complexity hospital where patients may come from diverse cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds, adapting communication to overcome these barriers is essential to ensure that all patients receive understandable and equitable care. Furthermore, the importance of ongoing communication education and training programs for all healthcare professionals is highlighted. These programs should focus not only on technical skills but also on

interpersonal and empathetic skills, which are crucial for effective communication and creating a patient-centered care experience.

## Conclusion

We conclude that the patients' perceptions of health communication were satisfactory, as they felt comfortable expressing their concerns and received the attention they expected. This communication contributes to building a relationship of trust and mutual respect between patients and healthcare teams. However, we identified communication weaknesses regarding information about possible medication side effects. The ability to convey information clearly, listen attentively to patients' concerns, and respond empathetically enhances the patient experience and contributes to the safety and effectiveness of care provided.

## Authors' Contributions

Souza, Sonia P: Data collection; Data analysis and interpretation; Statistical analysis; Manuscript writing; Silva, Letícia B: Data collection; Data analysis and interpretation; Statistical analysis; Writing of the manuscript; Rosa, Daielle VL: Data collection; Data analysis and interpretation; Statistical analysis; Writing of the manuscript; Ferreira, Gabriele CS: Data collection; Data analysis and interpretation; Statistical analysis; Writing of the manuscript; Reis, Gislene AX: Data analysis and interpretation; Statistical analysis; Critical revision of the manuscript.

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