


Chapter 9

Practices of Qualitative Studies in Medical Sciences: The Focus Groups Method Applied to Patients

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ABSTRACT

This chapter provides guidance on how to conduct focus groups and how they can be applied to the patient journey in a healthcare setting. A literature review was carried out to provide a vision of how best to conduct the focus group approach. Firstly, the study begins with a conceptual exploration that consists of developing a connection between focus groups and the patient pathway that has not previously been linked in other work (study contributions). Secondly, the authors examine a literature review which consists of exploring the contributions of focus groups to the patient journey, setting aside any prior knowledge. This chapter may act as a conceptual catalyst, provoking new thinking between focus groups and the medical sciences.

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INTRODUCTION

The focus group method has become an indispensable instrument for elucidating the intricacies of patient journeys across a spectrum of medical settings. This method enables the collection of detailed, qualitative data that can elucidate subtle aspects of patients' experiences, perceptions and needs. By synthesising the available literature, we can define the most effective ways of applying focus groups to the patient journey. In the literature, the World Health Organization (WHO) identifies improving access to care as a significant concern. It is evident that the quality of care can be enhanced by a comprehensive understanding of the needs and expectations of customers. Patient satisfaction is enhanced when their needs are met or exceeded. A patient's expressed satisfaction with the care they receive is a significant predictor of their likelihood of continuing their treatment at that healthcare facility (Batchelor, Owens, Read and Bloor, 1994; Bell, Krivich and Boyd, 1997; Goldfield, 1996). However, the measurement of satisfaction is complex and multidimensional. The most commonly used approach to determining how satisfied patients is with the services they receive is the patient satisfaction survey. In fact, survey results often fail to produce useful data for programme improvement (Williams, Coyle and Healy, 1998). A related problem is that surveys generally do not give patients the opportunity to express how they would like to receive services (Batchelor et al, 1994). For example, the written survey technique does not allow patients who are less educated and literate, or for whom English is not always their first language, to express themselves. The use of questionnaires can also discriminate against these groups (McIver, 1991). However, setting up discussion groups tells patients that they are being listened to and that their contribution is valued. Focus groups have been found to be very useful in the development and testing of new patient services (Smith, Scammon and Beck, 1995) and in the ongoing monitoring of existing services (Joint Commission on Accreditation of Health Care Organisations, 1995). A number of journal articles have discussed the use of focus groups by hospitals and health care organisations to understand patients' perspectives (e.g. Nelson and Batalden, 1993; Nemeth, Hendricks, Salaway and Garcia, 1998; Smith et al., 1995). It should be noted that focus groups can be very expensive, time consuming and labour intensive (Ford et al., 1997). Costs may include paying for a skilled facilitator, finding suitable members and offering investment incentives. Recruiting participants and analysing the data takes time and effort. These issues need to be addressed from the outset. The problem of this work is therefore as follows: How can the focus group method best be used to improve patient care?

In order to address this topic, a systematic analysis of a literature review will be conducted. The objective is to provide a comprehensive overview of the procedures involved in utilising focus groups in the context of patient journeys, along with a

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