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**Title**

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Internal communication in dispensing doctor practices and community pharmacies: findings from case studies.

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**Body**

*The body of the structured abstract should be limited to 350 words*

**Background:** Dispensing doctor practices are those which can, like community pharmacies, dispense prescriptions. They are usually located in rural areas. This study set out to investigate similarities and differences in the provision of pharmaceutical services at dispensing doctor practices (DDs) and community pharmacies (CPs) and to identify key issues affecting the quality of these services.

**Methods:** Case studies of 3 CPs and 4 DDs in south west England, purposively selected for diversity of size and location, were conducted, involving observation, document analysis and staff and patient interviews. Extensive field notes were taken during site visits and organised and condensed into detailed site reports. Interview transcripts were thematically analysed. Overarching themes across sites were identified.

**Findings:** Internal staff communication was one of the key themes identified. Effective communication between staff at CPs and DDs was important because it can improve prescription processing speed, help avoid running out of stock and prevent errors. There was great diversity in how staff communicated at the different sites. What was important was whether there was a common understanding among staff as to how different messages should be communicated. Perceived role divisions were a potential barrier to communication. Internal communication appeared to be linked to the wider practice ethos, whereby sites with a strong, cohesive ethos demonstrated better communication and better service quality. Where there was a strong patient-centred ethos staff were more likely to 'go the extra mile' for a patient. Despite all staff across sites recognising the importance of internal communication, none of the sites reflected on their communication practices.

**Discussion:** Given the important patient safety and satisfaction implications it was surprising that sites did not consider reviewing their communication practices, even after communication breakdowns had resulted in sub-optimal care being provided.. Good communication between staff is vital for promoting shared values and building and maintaining a strong team ethos. This in turn benefits staff commitment and satisfaction, which is then conveyed to patients. We suggest that more attention needs to be paid to communication among all staff at CPs and DDs as it can impact on quality of patient care in several ways.

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