During pandemics, the need for healthcare workers increases as more people get sick and need care. At the same time, healthcare workers may fall ill themselves or be placed in quarantine. Governments across the world are trying different solutions to address this problem. One possible solution is to move the care of some patient groups from more specialised to less specialised health workers, for instance by moving certain tasks from doctors to nurses.

About the review

A Cochrane Review of effectiveness research assessed the effects of moving primary healthcare services from doctors to nurses (Laurant 2018). The review analysed 18 studies of effectiveness, mainly from high-income countries. In some studies, nurses were responsible for all patients who came to the clinic or for all patients who needed urgent consultation. In some studies, nurses were responsible for patients with particular chronic diseases, or were responsible for providing healthcare education or preventive services to certain groups of patients. Included studies compared these nurses to doctors carrying out the same tasks.

Main results of the review

Our review shows that nurse-led primary care may lead to slightly fewer deaths among certain groups of patients, compared to doctor-led care. However, the results vary and it is possible that nurse-led primary care makes little or no difference to the number of deaths. In addition, patients probably have similar or better results in areas of health such as heart disease, diabetes, rheumatism, ...
and high blood pressure. Patients also are probably slightly more satisfied with their care and may have a slightly better quality of life when treated by nurses.

This review also shows that, compared to doctors, nurses probably have longer consultations, and their patients are slightly more likely to keep follow-up appointments. Studies found little or no difference in the number of prescriptions and there may be little or no difference in the numbers of tests and investigations ordered, or in patients’ use of other services. The effects of nurse-led primary care on the amount of advice and information given to patients, and on whether guidelines are followed, are uncertain as the certainty of these findings is very low.

Our review suggests that the impacts on the costs of care of using nurses instead of doctors to deliver primary care are uncertain. We assessed the certainty of this finding as very low.

In a summary of another Cochrane review, we present implementation considerations when moving tasks from doctors to nurses in primary care. Summary title: Nurses as substitutes for doctors in primary care: implementation considerations.
Find the review and summary here

Reference
This review is among a series of systematic reviews informing the WHO recommendations on: Optimizing health worker roles for maternal and newborn health through task shifting (https://optimizemnh.org/)


The Norwegian Satellite of the Effective Practice and Organisation of Care (EPOC) Group receives funding from the Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation (Norad), via the Norwegian Institute of Public Health to support review authors in the production of their reviews.

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