

THE ROLE OF INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION IN IMPROVING THE QUALITY OF HEALTH SERVICES: A LITERATURE REVIEW ON CULTURAL AWARENESS AND COMMUNICATION SKILLS AMONG MEDICAL PERSONNEL IN INDONESIA

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Abstract

This study aims to examine the role of intercultural communication in improving the quality of health services in Indonesia through a literature review on cultural awareness and intercultural communication skills among medical personnel. In the context of Indonesia's multicultural society, health services require medical personnel to be able to interact with patients from various cultural backgrounds effectively, empathetically, and adaptively. This literature study collects and analyses various scientific sources, including journals, books, and research reports from the last 5 to 10 years. The results of the study show that cultural awareness is an important basis for medical personnel in understanding the values, beliefs, and health behaviours of patients, while intercultural communication skills play a role in translating this understanding into effective communication practices that respect differences. The integration of these two aspects has been proven to increase patient trust, satisfaction, and compliance with treatment, which ultimately strengthens the quality of healthcare services. This study recommends the need for policies and continuous training programmes that integrate intercultural communication competencies into the education system and professional practice of healthcare workers in Indonesia, thereby creating more inclusive, equitable, and humane healthcare services.

Keywords: intercultural communication, cultural awareness, medical personnel, communication skills, quality of health services, Indonesia

Introduction

Indonesia is known as a diverse nation with a wide variety of cultures, ethnicities, languages, and religions. On the one hand, this diversity is a social strength that reflects a rich and dynamic national identity; on the other hand, however, this diversity also presents serious challenges in the context of public services, including the health sector. The Indonesian healthcare system must be able to accommodate and serve people from various cultural backgrounds fairly and be sensitive to differences in values and lifestyles (Wulandari, 2022b).

Healthcare services are not only related to medical and technological aspects, but are also closely related to social and cultural factors that influence patients' decisions, perceptions, and behaviour. Many studies show that effective

communication between patients and medical personnel can increase satisfaction, trust, and compliance with treatment. However, in reality, many healthcare professionals still lack adequate cultural awareness when dealing with patients from different backgrounds ((Sudarmo et al., 2021)). As a result, misunderstandings, conflicts, and even rejection of medical procedures can occur due to poorly managed cultural differences in perception.

Intercultural communication in healthcare serves as a bridge connecting the medical dimension with the socio-cultural context of patients. When medical personnel understand the cultural values and beliefs of patients, they can adjust their communication methods, consultation styles, and treatment approaches to be more acceptable and respectful. For example, medical personnel serving patients from the Islamic community need to understand patients' views on modesty, gender interactions, and the consumption of certain medications. Such understanding fosters trust and collaboration between patients and healthcare providers, ultimately improving the quality of healthcare services (Taylan, 2022) .

Failure to establish effective cross-cultural communication often leads to a *cultural gap* between patients and healthcare professionals. Differences in language and communication styles can lead to misinterpretation of symptoms or medical instructions. This not only hinders the healing process, but also has the potential to pose a risk to patient safety. In the context of primary health care and hospitals, cross-cultural miscommunication is one of the factors contributing to low patient satisfaction and treatment effectiveness, especially in areas with high ethnic heterogeneity such as Eastern Indonesia and large cities (Khairunnisa, 2023b) .

Cultural awareness is a fundamental skill that healthcare professionals must possess in order to adapt to a multicultural work environment. This awareness includes an understanding of the perspectives, values, and customs that influence individual health behaviours. Healthcare professionals with high *cultural awareness* will be more sensitive to diversity, avoid prejudice, and respect differences in the process of providing healthcare services (Nuraini, 2023) . Therefore, training that integrates cultural aspects into medical and nursing education is highly relevant for improving cross-cultural communication competencies in the healthcare field.

In addition to cultural awareness, *intercultural communication skills* are also an important aspect that needs to be developed by healthcare workers. These skills include verbal and nonverbal skills, empathy, as well as the ability to listen actively and adapt communication styles to the cultural context of patients. In a heterogeneous work environment such as hospitals in Indonesia, medical personnel with intercultural communication skills will be able to navigate potential conflicts, build mutually respectful relationships, and achieve service goals more effectively(Pramesti, 2022) . Therefore, intercultural communication competence must be an integral part of medical education curricula and continuing education.

The quality of healthcare services is greatly influenced by the interpersonal relationship between medical personnel and patients. This relationship is not only built on clinical expertise, but also determined by trust that grows from open, empathetic, and culturally sensitive communication. In the multicultural context of Indonesia, the inability of healthcare workers to understand differences in values and cultural expressions can create gaps in the interpretation and acceptance of healthcare services (Schouten, 2023b) . Therefore, research on intercultural communication in the healthcare sector is crucial to identify factors that support or hinder the quality of services in a diverse society.

Although many efforts have been made to improve the quality of health services in Indonesia, most of the focus is still on improving infrastructure and technical competence. Communication and cultural sensitivity are often overlooked, even though these two factors have a significant impact on the success of medical practices. The success of public health programmes, such as immunisation, family planning, and infectious disease control, depends not only on medical strategies, but also on the ability of health workers to convey messages and interact in a manner appropriate to the cultural context of the target community (Turkson-Ocran, 2022b) .

In recent years, there has been an increase in global attention to the importance of *cultural competence* in the health sector. Countries such as the United States, Canada, and Australia have developed cultural competency standards for healthcare workers to ensure inclusive and equitable services for all ethnic groups (Turkson-Ocran, 2022b) . As a multicultural country, Indonesia can benefit from this international experience, but it is still necessary to adapt these approaches to the local socio-cultural context. This is important to avoid adopting models that are not in line with the reality of healthcare practices in Indonesia (Putra, 2022) .

Thus, this study is expected to contribute theoretically and practically to the development of more humanistic, adaptive, and patient-oriented healthcare services.

Research Methods

This study utilises a literature review method, which aims to examine and analyse various scientific sources related to the role of intercultural communication in improving the quality of healthcare services, with a particular focus on cultural awareness and communication skills among medical personnel in Indonesia. Data was collected through the identification and selection of journal articles, books, and research reports published in the last 5 to 10 years and relevant to the research theme (Elijah & Aslan, 2025) . The analysis was conducted thematically by comparing findings from various studies to explore patterns, challenges, and strategies applied in the context of intercultural communication in healthcare (Green et al., 2006) . This approach allowed for an in-depth exploration of the concepts of cultural awareness and communication

competence, as well as their implications for the effectiveness of interactions between medical personnel and patients from diverse cultural backgrounds.

Results and Discussion

Cultural Awareness of Medical Personnel in Health Services

Cultural awareness is the main foundation in healthcare practices that are oriented towards the holistic needs of patients. This concept refers to the ability of medical personnel to recognise, understand, and respect the differences in values, beliefs, and health behaviours of individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds (Putra, 2022) . In the context of multicultural Indonesia, cultural awareness is an important element in ensuring fair, inclusive, and patient-centred healthcare services. Healthcare professionals who are culturally aware will be able to see each patient not only as an individual with clinical problems, but also as a whole person with a social and cultural heritage that influences their perspective on illness and treatment (Seo, 2022) .

In everyday medical practice, cultural awareness plays a role in shaping effective interactions between medical personnel and patients. Differences in language, spiritual beliefs, eating habits, and perceptions of health can lead to misunderstandings if not properly understood by medical personnel. For example, some ethnic groups believe that illness is the result of spiritual imbalance, not just biological factors (Wulandari, 2022a) . If medical personnel directly reject these beliefs, patients may feel disrespected and be reluctant to continue treatment. Therefore, the ability to listen empathetically and respect the patient's views without judgement is a true reflection of high cultural awareness.

Cultural awareness encompasses not only knowledge of cultural differences, but also self-awareness of the personal values and biases held by healthcare professionals. Many healthcare professionals unconsciously bring their own cultural perspectives into their professional interactions. If left unchecked, these biases can influence how they respond to patients or make clinical decisions. For example, healthcare professionals who hold certain views on gender roles may unintentionally treat male and female patients differently. Through continuous self-reflection, healthcare professionals can identify prejudices that may hinder cross-cultural communication and strive to adjust their professional behaviour to remain objective and ethical.(, 2022) .

In the context of medical and nursing education, the development of cultural awareness needs to be an integral part of the curriculum. Learning about the values, customs, and belief systems of various cultures can help prospective medical personnel understand the diversity of patients they will encounter in the field (Schouten, 2023a) . In addition, simulations and *role plays* that depict intercultural situations can increase students' sensitivity to the dynamics of cross-cultural communication. Studies in various countries show that cultural awareness training can increase empathy, reduce

stereotypes, and improve the quality of relationships between healthcare providers and recipients (Formosa, 2021).

Cultural awareness is also closely related to the ability of medical personnel to adjust their approach to service based on the social, economic, and religious backgrounds of patients. For example, in Muslim communities, medical personnel need to understand the rules regarding modesty, the use of medical equipment on patients of the opposite sex, and adherence to prayer times. Ignorance of such matters can cause discomfort and reduce patient trust in healthcare institutions. Thus, cultural awareness not only serves to avoid conflict, but also as a means of building mutually respectful relationships between medical personnel and patients (Lestari, 2023).

In addition, the concept of cultural awareness includes an understanding of the social factors that influence community access to and behaviour regarding health. Some ethnic groups may have limited access to health facilities due to economic, geographical, or belief barriers to modern medicine. In such situations, medics with cultural awareness can adapt their communication strategies and service approaches to make them more acceptable to the community. They can use local languages, rely on community leaders as communication bridges, or modify the way health information is conveyed in accordance with local norms (Dell’Osso, 2016).

Cultural awareness also plays a role in improving the effectiveness of therapeutic communication between doctors or nurses and patients. Patients who feel understood and respected will be more open in expressing their symptoms, medical history, and emotional condition. This openness makes it easier for medical personnel to make a diagnosis and determine the appropriate intervention (Sahar, 2023). Conversely, if patients feel judged or belittled because of their cultural background, they tend to close themselves off and are reluctant to participate in medical decision-making. Therefore, consistently building cultural awareness is an important strategy for improving the relationship of mutual trust between patients and healthcare professionals.

Research conducted by (Pramana, 2023) shows that cultural awareness has a positive correlation with increased patient satisfaction and better clinical outcomes. Patients served by healthcare professionals with high cultural sensitivity tend to have higher treatment compliance rates and report more positive service experiences. On the other hand, institutions that fail to prioritise cultural awareness often experience high levels of patient complaints and low service reputation. This fact demonstrates that cultural awareness is not only beneficial at the individual level but also has a direct impact on the overall quality of the healthcare system.

At the institutional level, hospitals and community health centres in Indonesia can strengthen cultural awareness by implementing policies that support culturally sensitive services. For example, providing medical interpreters in areas with multilingual populations, conducting regular training for medical personnel on cross-cultural communication, and developing ethical guidelines that are sensitive to differences in

values. The implementation of such policies creates a more inclusive work environment and minimises the risk of discrimination in healthcare services. Institutions that proactively build cultural awareness will be more resilient in responding to the increasingly diverse needs of the community (Putri, 2023).

In the Indonesian context, strengthening the cultural awareness of medical personnel is also related to the values of Pancasila and Bhinneka Tunggal Ika, which place diversity as the strength of the nation. These values are in line with the principles of equitable and human-oriented health services. By internalising the values of tolerance, empathy, and respect for differences, medical personnel can become agents of social change who support intercultural harmony in the health sector. This is important because healthcare services are often the first space where intensive and direct cross-cultural interactions occur (Santoso, 2021).

However, there are still various challenges in building cultural awareness in the medical workforce environment. Time constraints, high workloads, and a lack of specialised training often cause medical personnel to focus more on clinical aspects than on the socio-cultural aspects of patients (Cipta, 2024). In addition, some medical personnel believe that cultural awareness is secondary and does not significantly affect treatment outcomes. This view highlights the need for policy and regulatory support that mandates the integration of cultural education into the training and professional development programmes of health workers (Khairunnisa, 2023a).

Overall, cultural awareness is a key competency that must be developed to realise effective, equitable, and responsive healthcare services that meet the diverse needs of the community. Through a deep understanding of culture, medical personnel can improve their adaptability, avoid prejudice, and strengthen the human dimension of their professional practice. Ultimately, cultural awareness is not merely additional knowledge, but rather an ethical and communication foundation that determines the success of the healthcare system in Indonesia in facing multicultural realities.

Intercultural Communication Skills in Medical Practice

Intercultural communication skills are a fundamental element that determines the success of interactions between medical personnel and patients in a multicultural healthcare environment. In a medical context, communication is not merely about exchanging information about diagnosis or treatment, but also a process of building trust, empathy, and mutual understanding between service providers and patients (Khairunnisa, 2023a). Intercultural communication skills enable medical personnel to adapt their communication style to the cultural background of patients, so that the message conveyed is received effectively and does not cause misunderstandings. In a country with cultural complexity such as Indonesia, this ability is a professional skill that is as important as clinical competence (Turkson-Ocran, 2022a).

Cross-cultural communication in healthcare encompasses two major dimensions, namely verbal and nonverbal dimensions. The verbal dimension involves the use of language that is clear, simple, and understandable to patients from various educational and cultural backgrounds. Meanwhile, the nonverbal dimension includes facial expressions, tone of voice, body language, and the use of physical space in medical interactions (Betancourt, 2016) . Many situations show that differences in the interpretation of nonverbal messages can cause tension. For example, intense eye contact is considered a sign of attention in some cultures, but can be considered rude or challenging in other cultures. Therefore, medical personnel need to develop sensitivity to adapt communication to the cultural norms of patients (Rahmawati, 2023).

Intercultural communication skills cannot be separated from the concepts of empathy and social context understanding. Empathy enables healthcare professionals to put themselves in the patient's position, understand their concerns, and respect the cultural values that shape their views on health and illness (Henderson, 2018) . In practice, empathetic healthcare professionals will be more patient in listening, less judgemental, and more flexible in providing medical explanations. This cross-cultural empathy is at the core of effective communication, as it helps healthcare professionals transcend barriers of language, social status, and religious background, and focus interactions on the goal of shared healing (Wijaya, 2023) .

One of the main issues in cross-cultural medical practice is the existence of significant language barriers. In Indonesia, many patients come from regions with strong regional languages, while medical personnel may come from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds. These barriers can slow down the diagnosis and medical decision-making process if not managed properly (Hartono, 2023) . Therefore, it is important for hospitals or community health centres to provide interpreters or local medical personnel who understand the language and social context of the surrounding community. In addition, medical personnel need to use simple communication strategies, such as utilising visuals, gestures, and message repetition to ensure accurate patient understanding(Koswara, 2022) .

Cross-cultural communication also requires medical personnel to recognise patients' communication styles, which are influenced by specific cultural values. Some cultures tend to be direct and expressive, while others emphasise politeness and caution in speech. In medical situations, these styles can influence how patients report symptoms and respond to doctors' advice. For example, patients from cultures that respect authority tend to be reluctant to ask questions or express discomfort, so medical personnel must proactively inquire about their condition in a non-intimidating manner. Understanding these cultural characteristics enables medical personnel to adjust their communication strategies to be more inclusive and effective (Muchtar, 2024) .

Intercultural communication skills must also include an understanding of the dynamics of power relations in interactions between medical personnel and patients. In certain cultures, doctors are considered to have absolute authority, so patients do not feel they have the right to participate in decisions regarding their treatment. To build a more equal and participatory relationship, medical personnel need to use a collaborative approach that involves patients in the treatment process. By adopting a communication style that respects the patient's views, medical personnel can increase patients' sense of responsibility for their own health and strengthen mutual trust (Wulandari, 2022b).

The application of intercultural communication skills in a medical setting also requires formal training and professional development support. This training should include cross-cultural communication theory, case studies, role-playing simulations, and reflection on real-life experiences. Through this approach, medical personnel can learn to identify communication errors, manage culturally sensitive situations, and improve their adaptability when dealing with patients from various backgrounds (Taylan, 2022). Many studies show that medical personnel who undergo intercultural communication training experience significant improvements in interpersonal skills, patient satisfaction, and clinical service effectiveness (Khairunnisa, 2023b).

In addition to the individual context, intercultural communication skills also need to be viewed from the perspective of the healthcare team. In daily practice, medical services are provided collaboratively by doctors, nurses, midwives, pharmacists, and other healthcare professionals. Cultural differences among team members can affect work dynamics, coordination, and decision-making. Therefore, intercultural communication skills are not only important for interactions with patients but also for maintaining harmonious collaboration among healthcare professionals. A tolerant and respectful work environment will result in more efficient and patient-safety-oriented services (Nuraini, 2023).

Technology also plays a role in expanding the dimensions of intercultural communication in the medical field. The use of telemedicine, online consultations, and other digital systems adds to the complexity of communication, especially when involving patients from different regions or cultures. In this context, medical personnel must be able to adapt their communication messages to remain clear, polite, and inclusive even through online media. They must also understand the differences in the interpretation of symbols, icons, or digital expressions that can vary across cultures. The integration of intercultural communication skills with digital literacy is an important point in optimising modern healthcare services in the era of globalisation (Pramesti, 2022).

The effectiveness of intercultural communication in medical practice can be measured through several indicators, such as patient satisfaction levels, treatment effectiveness, and communication error frequency. Research in various countries shows

that improvements in intercultural communication skills among medical personnel are directly proportional to improvements in service quality and public trust in health institutions. Patients feel more valued, more open, and more motivated to participate in care programmes (Schouten, 2023b) . Therefore, investing in the development of cross-cultural communication competencies is a strategic step towards strengthening the overall quality of healthcare services.

In the context of national policy, intercultural communication skills can be used as one of the indicators in assessing the quality of medical personnel and accrediting health facilities. The government and health education institutions can play an active role by incorporating intercultural communication training into professional education standards and continuing education. This approach can create medical personnel who are not only clinically competent, but also sensitive to the social realities of the community (Turkson-Ocran, 2022b) . Thus, the national health care system will be better prepared to face the challenges of globalisation, population migration, and demographic changes that increase cultural diversity in health facilities.

Ultimately, intercultural communication skills are a manifestation of the professionalism and integrity of medical personnel in serving the community humanely. These skills require self-awareness, empathy, and a commitment to learning to understand the differences that exist around them. By mastering intercultural communication skills, medical personnel can bridge social gaps, strengthen patient trust, and create meaningful healthcare experiences. Within the framework of Indonesia, which is based on the value of unity in diversity, the development of intercultural communication skills is not only a professional necessity, but also a moral responsibility in order to achieve equitable and equal healthcare services for all citizens.

Conclusion

Intercultural communication plays a very important role in improving the quality of healthcare services in Indonesia, which has a multicultural society. Interaction between medical personnel and patients depends not only on clinical skills, but also on the extent to which medical personnel understand, respect, and adapt to differences in the values, customs, and cultural beliefs of patients. Sensitivity to cultural context enables the creation of harmonious, effective relationships based on mutual trust and respect, which in turn strengthens patient satisfaction and safety as indicators of healthcare quality.

Cultural awareness and intercultural communication skills are two complementary core components in medical practice. Cultural awareness provides a foundation for understanding patient diversity, while intercultural communication skills serve as a tool for translating that understanding into concrete and empathetic interactions. The cultural literacy possessed by medical personnel strengthens their ability to adapt to patients from various social, linguistic, and value backgrounds,

thereby minimising the risk of miscommunication and increasing the effectiveness of care. These two aspects emphasise that cultural competence needs to be integrated into health professional education and training as part of improving service quality.

The implications of these findings indicate the need for strategic policies to strengthen the development of intercultural communication in the health sector, whether through formal education programmes, continuing training, or institutional policies that emphasise inclusive and humanistic services. Hospitals, community health centres, and medical education institutions must pay attention to the importance of cross-cultural communication training so that all medical personnel are able to provide services that respect the diversity of Indonesian society. Thus, intercultural communication is not only an additional skill, but also the foundation of professionalism and health service ethics oriented towards justice, empathy, and humanity.

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