

Why we need to talk to each other more, not less.

By Shyr Chui

At the risk of sounding like an old fogie of a certain generation (Gen X if you must know). I've concluded that the way modern technology is changing our culture, and particularly the way we communicate with one another is less desirable than we think. In my field of healthcare, medical imaging, and driven by the ever-increasing demand for our services, there is an immutable trend towards less communication with colleagues, be they fellow radiologists, technologists, clinician colleagues or nursing staff. To optimize "reading" time, we've delegated as many administrative tasks as we can in our department. Tasks such as answering the phone, taking questions from clinicians, protocoling exam requests and checking scans with technologists before the patient leaves the department, are no longer "standard operating procedure". The result is that radiologists can now do their work "uninterrupted" and at a location secret to almost everyone ("is Dr. B working from home today?").

Don't get me wrong, interruptions to our work can be frustrating and detrimental to the quality of our reads, especially with long complex cases requiring extended concentration. But I think we've swung too far in one direction.

This drive towards efficiency has had two contrasting outcomes, related to the two categories of work we do. Firstly, and undoubtedly, we are more efficient at reading straightforward cases across all imaging modalities, cases where the clinical question being asked of imaging is short and simple. Is there a stone in this patient's ureter? Does the patient have deep vein thrombosis? Technology has actually helped us with these types of cases. With standardized technologist protocols, voice recognition-aided dictation and auto-generated report templates, radiologists can whip through reading these cases like a hot knife through butter. To borrow a term from quality improvement and systems engineering, these types of cases can be termed "flow-shop" cases where the product is always the same and we can standardize and optimize their production for speed whilst maintaining quality.

But there is a second and different category of work we do which are the more complex cases, often involving inpatients or patients with complex medical conditions. These require a more customized approach. Why is this post operative patient failing to recover? What is the cause of this patient's chest pain? Why is this patient falling? These clinical questions require a different approach to imaging, one customized to the individual patient and one that cannot be easily standardized and automated. These cases may require exchange of more clinical information and review of previous imaging or lab results before the right imaging protocol and modality can be selected. Even then, the imaging may be complex, requiring custom protocols and requiring checking while the patient is still "on the table" to ensure no supplemental images are required. These are "job-shop" cases, customized work that takes longer to achieve a high-quality result. And these cases require much more communication between those involved in the patient's care.

I believe our drive towards efficiency; fewer interruptions and less communication works fine for the flow-shop cases but sacrifices quality for the job shop-cases. In response, the job-shop cases end up with more imaging, often inappropriate, more radiation and take up more time (longer bed stays) as they work through one imaging study after another until the clinical question is answered.

That is why I believe there's still a place for more and improved communication, and why I'll continue to pick up the phone, answer the knock on my office door and continue to work in the department, even if

it means enduring interruptions. Patients with complex clinical problems deserve more from our health system and require more from us than an “efficient” process. Our system, too, would benefit from reduced costs related to inappropriate imaging and shorter bed stays. In each case, talking more to each other benefits everyone. Not to mention the social benefits of direct communication, the boost to camaraderie, improved civility and positive work culture that come when work colleagues talk to each other. But that’s the subject of a different post for another time. Until then, let’s keep talking!

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