Let's talk it out!
Empowering pediatric nurses with skilled communication to navigate difficult conversations in the healthcare setting

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Background

- In August 2023, our online Nursing Educational Needs Assessment (NENA) asked nurses, "What type of skills would you like to develop more in your practice?"

- Among 512 respondents, **difficult conversations and communication with families** was the option with the greatest reported educational need, selected by 290 nurses.

- Our organization did not have pre-existing, on-demand communication education for frontline nurses; this pilot project aimed to address that educational need.
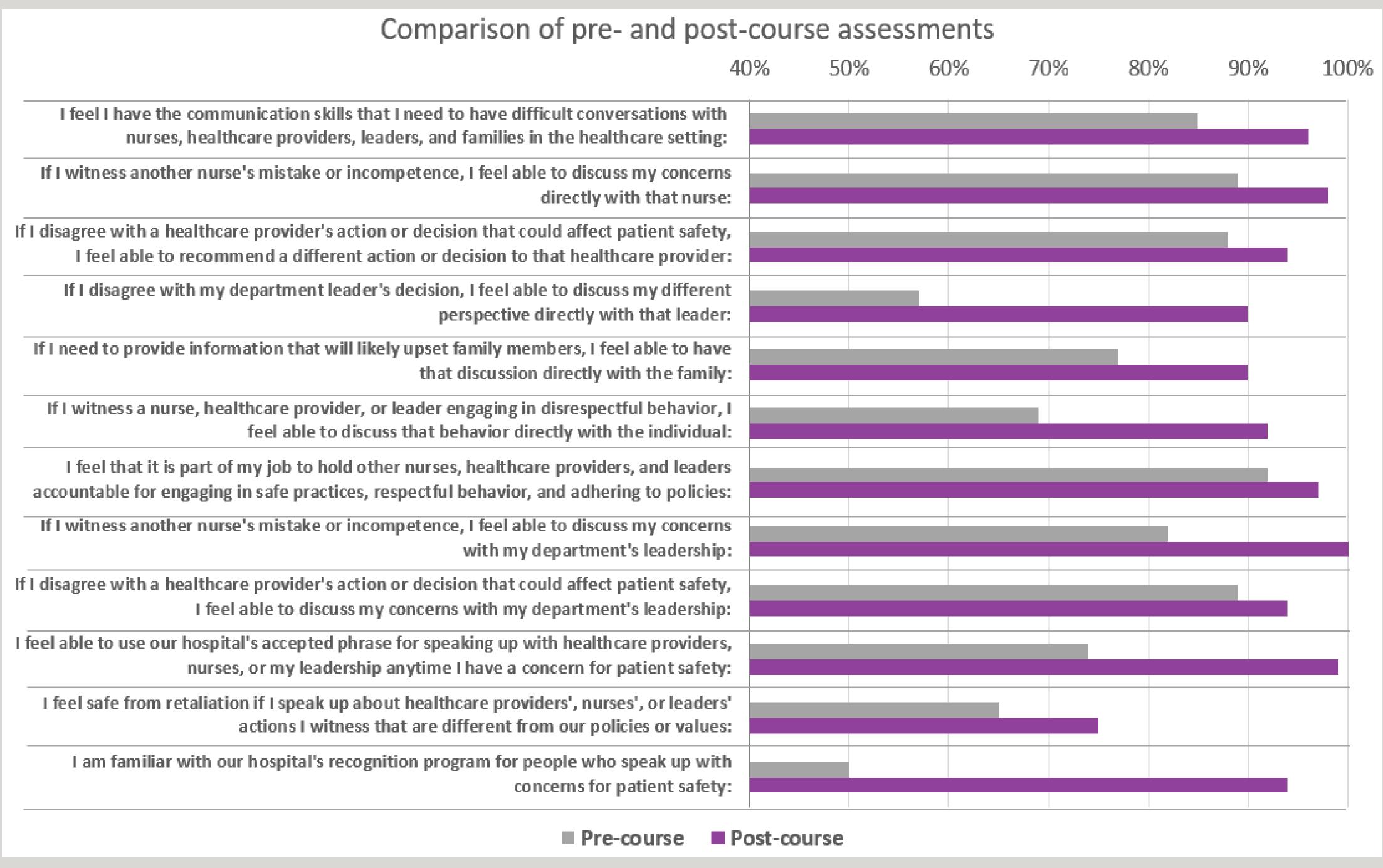
Literature

- The American Association of Critical-Care Nurses' (AACN) seminal document, AACN Standards for Establishing and Sustaining Healthy Work Environments, defines **skilled communication** as an essential, evidence-based standard that promotes nurse retention and optimum patient outcomes; communication should be practiced like any other skill.

- Nurses and clinical supervisors may avoid difficult conversations, contributing to patient safety concerns and job dissatisfaction.

- Frameworks, like ISBAR and EMPOWERS, can be used to support effective communication in the healthcare setting.

Methods

- The course's hybrid design was based on nurses' preferred learning style indicated on the NENA; the course was piloted on five units with nurses of all experience levels (under 2 years – more than 10 years) as a nurse.

- Fifteen minutes of self-paced, online learning introduced key concepts and the ISBAR, EMPOWERS frameworks, followed by a one-hour, in-person communication simulation to apply knowledge through role-playing during challenging scenarios with uncomfortable topics.

Outcomes

- Seventy-nine nurses took the pre-course assessment, 50 nurses took the post-course assessment; nurses were only permitted to take the post-course assessment if they had completed both the self-paced education and the communication simulation.

- On the pre-course assessment, 85% of nurses self-reported that they had the communication skills needed to have difficult conversations with nurses, healthcare providers, leaders, and families in the healthcare setting; however, for some specific scenarios, they self-reported less ability.

- Feeling safe from retaliation remained below 80% agreement on both the pre- and post-course assessments.

Comparison of pre- and post-course assessments

Implications for practice

- Nurses may have a more positive perception of their overall, general communication skills, but they may perceive less communication ability when presented with specific scenarios.

- Hybrid communication education for frontline nurses may improve nurses' communication skills by introducing communication frameworks and providing opportunities to practice communication skills in person during role-playing in a supportive environment.

- Focus is needed to create safe communication environments where nurses truly feel safe from retaliation, and they are empowered with tools to navigate a variety of difficult conversations.

Acknowledgements

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