FANS OF CAR RACING will attest to the importance of the pit crew in assuring the race car is at optimal performance. Each member of the crew has a specific task and works hard to assure she or he is the best at that task. And while each works independently, together they move toward the overall goal of improving the finish, or outcome, of the car in the race.

What if interprofessional healthcare teams worked the same way? Each member of the healthcare team has a specific role in improving the patient’s outcome and, as with a pit crew, the outcome depends on the individuals’ ability to work together, share a common goal, and most importantly, communicate effectively.

In a commencement speech to the Harvard Medical School class of 2011, Atul Gawande, MD, MPH, made such a comparison. Gawande, a surgeon and author known for his innovative and influential articles on healthcare delivery, told the graduates, “By a system, I mean that the diverse people that actually work together to direct their specialized capabilities toward common goals for patients. They are coordinated by design. They are pit crews.”

Nurses can optimize their roles on interprofessional teams. Nurses are integral team members, and their ability to collaborate and communicate enhances the team’s efforts and ultimately yields the best outcomes for the patient.

Building teamwork from the ground up
The interprofessional healthcare team is not a new concept. However, despite recommendations in various reports to influence their development at the educational level, little has been done. Recognizing this, an expert panel comprising various health professional education groups, including nursing, medicine, dentistry, public health, and pharmacy, called on the entire health profession’s schools to make interprofessional education the norm. The panel’s 2011 report, Core Competencies for Interprofessional Collaborative Practice, identified outcomes-based competencies, or ways that graduates must demonstrate their knowledge, skill, and ability to be part of a team. This type of teamwork would create a coordinated effort across many different professions, guide curricular development, and prompt action, research, and further development of cooperation between many health professions.

The four competency domains outlined in the report prepare the health professional for practice as part of an integrated, cohesive team. The domains are as follows:

- values/ethics for interprofessional practice
- roles/responsibilities
- interprofessional communication
- teams and teamwork.

These domains and specific competencies enhance the interprofessional team by creating a climate of mutual respect, an understanding of the contribution of each profession, an ability to communicate effectively with patients and team members, and enhanced team relationships and dynamics. To access the full text of the Core Competencies for Interprofessional Collaborative Practice, go to www.aacn.nche.edu/education-resources/IPECReport.pdf.
Honing skills as a nurse

Nurses can best build their competencies as team members through a unique resource, *Nursing: Scope and Standards of Practice* (2nd ed). Several standards and associated competencies of professional performance guide nurses on aspects of their practice related to teamwork. Specifically, there are three relevant standards: communication, leadership, and collaboration.

The communication competencies guide nurses in the effective, efficient transfer of ideas and observations. These competencies include “Maintains communication with other providers to minimize risks associated with transfers and transition in care delivery” and “Contributes her or his own professional perspective in discussions with the interprofessional team.”

Leadership competencies go hand in hand with communication, but also contribute to the culture of the team and the practice environment. They guide nurses on how to be better team members, and include “Treats colleagues with respect, trust, and dignity” and “Develops communication and conflict resolution skills.”

Collaboration competencies get at the essence of teamwork and working together. These include “Applies group process and negotiation techniques with healthcare consumers and colleagues”, “Adheres to standards and applicable codes of conduct that govern behavior...”, and “Engages in teamwork and team-building process.”

Overcoming barriers to teamwork

No team is perfect, and breakdowns do happen. Nurses should know what potential barriers can limit effective teamwork and understand ways to avoid, or if need be, overcome these issues.

Diversity can bring many benefits to health care. But as the healthcare workforce grows increasingly diverse, tensions can arise due to differences in culture, language, lifestyle, or beliefs. Understanding differences and awareness of one’s own beliefs and attitudes are the keys to creating fruitful relationships with teams and patients. For more on diversity awareness for nurses, go to www.nursingworld.org/DiversityAwareness.

Sometimes, a simple lack of respect is a barrier to teamwork. Nurses may have different interpretations of the term respect, ranging from the concept of hierarchy to treating each other as equals. Nurse researchers Beth Ulrich, EdD, RN, FACHE, FAAN, and Cindy Lefton, PhD, RN, interviewed nurses on their perceptions of respect. Through their research, they developed five behaviors that demonstrate respect and can help a team refine its ability to function:

- Listen, be fully attentive, and truly hear.
- Acknowledge and express appreciation.
- Exhibit empathy and understanding.
- Display courtesy and consideration.
- Be accountable and professional.

Establishing a written code of conduct also mitigates inappropriate behavior that can harm a team’s performance. This code of conduct sets the concrete expectations for all members of an organization and provides a mechanism to redirect disruptive individuals or groups. The code of conduct is so important to effective teamwork and safe patient care that the Joint Commission, the major accrediting body of healthcare institutions in the United States, requires that one be established. Nurses should refer to and abide by the code of conduct, as it is crucial to ensuring a safe and quality work environment.

Providing optimal patient care, much like competing in a race, requires all elements of a team to operate, communicate, and participate at their best. By improving their skills and abilities to participate in interprofessional teams, nurses can provide the best care possible to their patients.

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