



FACTORS INFLUENCING DECISION-MAKING BY NURSES IN TRIAGING PATIENTS IN THE EMERGENCY DEPARTMENT

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Abstract:

Triage is a critical aspect of emergency care, where nurses must quickly assess and prioritize patients based on the severity of their condition. Understanding the factors that impact nurses' decision-making in this high-pressure environment is crucial for improving patient outcomes and optimizing resource allocation. The review examines the influence of factors such as experience level, training, workload, time constraints, communication skills, and institutional protocols on nurses' triage decisions. It also considers the impact of individual factors such as emotional intelligence, stress, and personal biases on decision-making processes. By synthesizing existing research on these factors, this article aims to provide insights into how nurses can make more effective and efficient triage decisions. Furthermore, the review discusses the role of technology in supporting nurses' decision-making in triage, including the use of electronic triage systems and decision support tools. These technologies have the potential to enhance the accuracy and consistency of triage decisions while also improving communication and information sharing among healthcare providers. Overall, this review highlights the complex interplay of factors that influence nurses' decision-making in triaging patients in the emergency department. By understanding and addressing these factors, healthcare organizations can better support their nursing staff and improve the quality of care provided to patients in critical need.

Keywords: Triage, Decision-making, Nurses, Emergency department, Factors, Patient prioritization

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DOI: 10.53555/ecb/2022.11.11.216

Introduction:

In the fast-paced and high-pressure environment of an emergency department, triage plays a crucial role in ensuring that patients receive the appropriate level of care in a timely manner. Triage is the process of prioritizing patients based on the severity of their condition, with the goal of identifying and treating those who require immediate attention first. This system helps to maximize resources, reduce wait times, and ultimately save lives [1].

The importance of triage in emergency care cannot be overstated. In a busy emergency department, healthcare providers must be able to quickly assess and prioritize patients based on the urgency of their medical needs. Without an effective triage system in place, patients with life-threatening conditions may not receive the timely care they need, leading to potentially disastrous outcomes [2].

Triage practices in healthcare have evolved over time, with roots dating back to the battlefield medicine of ancient times. The term "triage" itself comes from the French word for sorting, and was first used in a medical context during the Napoleonic Wars. During this time, military physicians developed a system for quickly assessing and prioritizing wounded soldiers based on the severity of their injuries [3].

In the early 20th century, triage practices began to be implemented in civilian healthcare settings, particularly in emergency departments. The introduction of the Emergency Severity Index (ESI) in the 1990s further standardized the triage process, providing a framework for healthcare providers to assess and prioritize patients based on the acuity of their condition [4].

Today, triage is a standard practice in emergency departments around the world, with trained nurses and physicians using a variety of tools and protocols to quickly assess and prioritize patients. This process typically involves taking vital signs, conducting a brief medical history, and performing a physical examination to determine the urgency of a patient's condition [2].

Triage is a vital component of emergency care, helping healthcare providers to efficiently allocate resources and prioritize patients based on the severity of their condition. By implementing effective triage practices, emergency departments can ensure that patients receive the timely care they need, ultimately improving outcomes and saving lives [4].

Factors Affecting Nurses' Decision-making in Triage:

Nurses play a crucial role in the healthcare system, particularly in emergency departments where triage

decisions can be a matter of life and death. Triage involves the process of prioritizing patient care based on the severity of their condition. The decisions made during triage are critical and can have a significant impact on patient outcomes. Several factors influence nurses' decision-making in triage, including their experience level, workload, communication skills, and adherence to institutional protocols [5].

• Experience Level and Training of Nurses

One of the primary factors affecting nurses' decision-making in triage is their experience level and training. Experienced nurses who have worked in emergency care settings for a longer period tend to have better clinical judgment and are more adept at quickly assessing and prioritizing patients based on their condition. These nurses have encountered a wide range of cases and have developed a keen sense of intuition that guides their decision-making process [6].

On the other hand, novice nurses or those with limited experience may struggle with the complexity of triage decisions, especially when faced with high-stress situations and critically ill patients. Inexperienced nurses may rely more heavily on protocols and guidelines, as they may lack the confidence to make quick decisions based on their clinical judgment alone [7].

Continual training and professional development are essential to ensure that nurses are equipped with the necessary knowledge and skills to make informed decisions during triage. Regular training sessions, simulation exercises, and opportunities for hands-on experience can help nurses improve their decision-making abilities and enhance their confidence in handling triage situations effectively [8].

• Workload and Time Constraints

Another significant factor that influences nurses' decision-making in triage is their workload and the time constraints they face. Emergency departments are often fast-paced environments with limited resources and high patient volumes. Nurses working in these settings must make rapid decisions under pressure, as delays in triage can result in adverse outcomes for patients [9].

High patient acuity levels, limited staffing, and competing priorities can contribute to increased stress and cognitive overload for nurses, affecting their ability to make quick and accurate triage decisions. In such situations, nurses may be forced to prioritize patients based on the severity of their condition, while also considering the available resources and the needs of other patients in the department [10].

Efforts to optimize workflow, streamline processes, and allocate resources efficiently can help alleviate the burden on nurses and enable them to make more informed decisions during triage. Adequate staffing levels, effective communication channels, and clear protocols for managing workload fluctuations are essential to support nurses in delivering timely and quality care to patients in need [11].

• **Communication Skills and Teamwork**

Effective communication skills and teamwork are crucial for nurses involved in the triage process. Clear and concise communication among healthcare team members is essential to ensure that critical information is shared promptly and accurately, enabling timely decision-making and coordinated care delivery [9].

Nurses must be able to communicate effectively with patients, their families, and other healthcare professionals to gather relevant information, provide updates on patient status, and collaborate on treatment plans. Strong interpersonal skills, active listening, and empathy are essential for building rapport with patients and establishing trust, which can enhance the overall quality of care provided during triage [12].

Teamwork is also vital in the triage setting, as nurses often work alongside physicians, paramedics, and other healthcare professionals to assess patients, prioritize care, and coordinate interventions. Collaborative decision-making, mutual respect, and a shared commitment to patient safety are essential components of effective teamwork in the emergency department [10].

• **Institutional Protocols and Guidelines**

Institutional protocols and guidelines serve as valuable tools to support nurses in making consistent and evidence-based decisions during triage. These protocols outline standardized procedures for assessing patient acuity, determining priority levels, and initiating appropriate interventions based on established clinical criteria [13].

Adherence to institutional protocols helps ensure that triage decisions are made in a systematic and objective manner, reducing variability in practice and promoting patient safety. Nurses must be familiar with the guidelines specific to their healthcare facility, as well as any updates or revisions to protocols that may impact their decision-making process [14].

While protocols provide a valuable framework for triage decision-making, nurses must also exercise clinical judgment and critical thinking skills to adapt to unique patient situations and respond to unexpected challenges. The ability to think on their

feet, prioritize effectively, and respond swiftly to changing circumstances is essential for nurses working in the dynamic environment of the emergency department [15].

• **Emotional Intelligence and Empathy:**

Emotional intelligence refers to the ability to recognize, understand, and manage one's own emotions, as well as the emotions of others. Individuals with high emotional intelligence are better equipped to make decisions that take into account the feelings and perspectives of others, leading to more positive outcomes. Empathy, in particular, is a crucial component of emotional intelligence that allows individuals to put themselves in someone else's shoes and consider how their decisions may impact others [16].

Research has shown that individuals with high emotional intelligence are more likely to make decisions that prioritize the well-being of others and foster positive relationships. This is because they are better able to regulate their own emotions and empathize with the emotions of others, leading to more thoughtful and compassionate decision-making [17].

• **Stress and Burnout:**

Stress and burnout can have a significant impact on decision-making, as individuals who are overwhelmed by stress are more likely to make impulsive or irrational decisions. Chronic stress can impair cognitive function and lead to fatigue, making it difficult for individuals to consider all available options and weigh the potential consequences of their decisions [18].

Burnout, which is a state of emotional, physical, and mental exhaustion caused by prolonged stress, can also hinder decision-making by diminishing motivation and reducing the ability to focus. Individuals experiencing burnout may struggle to make decisions that align with their values and goals, as they may lack the energy and clarity needed to make thoughtful choices [17].

• **Personal Biases and Unconscious Prejudices:**

Personal biases and unconscious prejudices can also influence decision-making, as individuals may unknowingly favor certain options or perspectives based on their own beliefs and experiences. These biases can lead to unfair or discriminatory decision-making, as individuals may unconsciously prioritize the needs and interests of certain groups over others [18].

It is important for individuals to be aware of their own biases and prejudices in order to make more informed and equitable decisions. By actively challenging their own assumptions and seeking out

diverse perspectives, individuals can mitigate the impact of personal biases on their decision-making and make choices that are fair and inclusive [19].

Impact of Technology on Triage Decision-making:

Triage is a critical process in healthcare settings that helps prioritize patient care based on the severity of their condition. Traditionally, triage decisions were made based on subjective assessments by healthcare professionals. However, with the advancement of technology, electronic triage systems and decision support tools have been developed to aid in the decision-making process. This essay will explore the impact of technology on triage decision-making, focusing on electronic triage systems, decision support tools, and the integration of technology in triage processes [20].

• Electronic Triage Systems

Electronic triage systems have revolutionized the way triage decisions are made in healthcare settings. These systems allow healthcare professionals to input patient data, such as vital signs, symptoms, and medical history, into a computerized system. The system then uses algorithms to analyze the data and assign a triage category based on the severity of the patient's condition [21].

One of the key benefits of electronic triage systems is the consistency and accuracy they provide in triage decision-making. By using standardized algorithms, these systems help ensure that patients are prioritized based on objective criteria rather than subjective assessments. This can help reduce the risk of errors in triage decisions and improve patient outcomes [21].

Another advantage of electronic triage systems is their ability to streamline the triage process. By automating the analysis of patient data, these systems can help healthcare professionals make faster and more efficient triage decisions. This can be particularly beneficial in busy emergency departments where time is of the essence [22].

• Decision Support Tools

In addition to electronic triage systems, decision support tools have also been developed to aid healthcare professionals in making triage decisions. These tools provide evidence-based guidelines and recommendations to help guide triage decisions based on the patient's symptoms and vital signs. Decision support tools can help healthcare professionals make more informed and evidence-based triage decisions. By providing access to the latest research and guidelines, these tools can help ensure that patients receive

appropriate and timely care based on their individual needs [23].

• Integration of Technology in Triage Processes

The integration of technology in triage processes has the potential to transform the way triage decisions are made in healthcare settings. By leveraging electronic triage systems and decision support tools, healthcare organizations can improve the efficiency, accuracy, and consistency of triage decision-making. However, it is important to note that technology should not replace the clinical judgment of healthcare professionals in triage decision-making. While electronic triage systems and decision support tools can provide valuable information and guidance, healthcare professionals should still use their clinical expertise to make final triage decisions [24].

Technology has had a significant impact on triage decision-making in healthcare settings. Electronic triage systems, decision support tools, and the integration of technology in triage processes have helped improve the efficiency, accuracy, and consistency of triage decisions. While technology can provide valuable support in triage decision-making, it is important for healthcare professionals to continue to rely on their clinical judgment to ensure that patients receive appropriate and timely care. By leveraging technology and clinical expertise, healthcare organizations can enhance the triage process and ultimately improve patient outcomes [25].

Challenges in Triage Decision-making:

One of the primary challenges in triage decision-making is the ethical dilemma of patient prioritization. Healthcare professionals are often faced with the difficult task of determining which patients should receive immediate care and which ones may have to wait. This decision is typically based on the principle of maximizing benefits and minimizing harm, but it can be complicated by factors such as age, comorbidities, and social factors. For example, should a young and otherwise healthy patient be prioritized over an elderly patient with multiple chronic conditions? These are the kinds of ethical dilemmas that healthcare professionals must navigate in the triage process [26].

Another challenge in triage decision-making is handling surge situations and mass casualties. In the event of a natural disaster, terrorist attack, or other mass casualty incident, healthcare facilities may be overwhelmed with a large number of patients requiring immediate care. In these situations, healthcare professionals must quickly assess and prioritize patients based on the severity

of their injuries and the likelihood of survival. This can be a chaotic and stressful process, as healthcare teams work together to save as many lives as possible with limited resources [27].

Balancing speed and accuracy in triage assessments is also a significant challenge for healthcare professionals. In emergency situations, time is often of the essence, and healthcare teams must make quick decisions to save lives. However, rushing through the triage process can lead to errors in patient prioritization, potentially resulting in harm to patients. On the other hand, taking too much time to assess each patient can delay critical care for those in need. Finding the right balance between speed and accuracy is essential in triage decision-making, and healthcare professionals must constantly strive to improve their skills in this area [28].

Triage decision-making is a complex and challenging process that requires healthcare professionals to navigate ethical dilemmas, surge situations, and the need for speed and accuracy in their assessments. By continually honing their skills and staying up-to-date on best practices in triage care, healthcare teams can better serve their patients and save lives in emergency situations [28].

Strategies to Enhance Nurses' Decision-making in Triage and Future Directions:

To enhance nurses' decision-making in triage, several strategies can be implemented. One such strategy is the development of training and education programs that focus on improving nurses' assessment skills and critical thinking abilities. These programs can provide nurses with the knowledge and tools they need to make informed decisions in high-pressure situations, ultimately leading to better patient outcomes. Additionally, ongoing education and training can help nurses stay up-to-date on the latest evidence-based practices in triage, ensuring that they are providing the best possible care to their patients [29].

Another strategy to enhance nurses' decision-making in triage is the implementation of team debriefing and feedback mechanisms. Debriefing allows nurses to reflect on their decisions and actions during a triage situation, identify areas for improvement, and learn from their experiences. By receiving feedback from their peers and supervisors, nurses can gain valuable insights into their performance and make adjustments to their practice as needed. This continuous cycle of reflection and feedback can help nurses develop their decision-making skills and become more confident and competent in their role [30].

Peer support and mentorship initiatives are also important for enhancing nurses' decision-making in triage. By pairing experienced nurses with less experienced colleagues, mentorship programs can provide new nurses with guidance, support, and advice as they navigate the complexities of triage. Peer support groups can also offer a forum for nurses to discuss challenging cases, share best practices, and seek advice from their peers. By fostering a culture of collaboration and support, these initiatives can help nurses feel more confident in their decision-making abilities and improve their overall performance in triage situations [31].

Enhancing nurses' decision-making in triage is essential for improving patient outcomes and ensuring the delivery of high-quality care in the emergency department. By implementing strategies such as training and education programs, team debriefing and feedback mechanisms, and peer support and mentorship initiatives, healthcare organizations can empower nurses to make informed and effective decisions in triage. Moving forward, it is crucial for healthcare organizations to continue investing in these strategies and exploring new opportunities for enhancing nurses' decision-making skills in triage. By doing so, we can ensure that nurses are well-equipped to meet the challenges of triage and provide the best possible care to patients in need [32].

Conclusion:

In conclusion, nurses' decision-making in triage is influenced by a combination of factors, including their experience level, workload, communication skills, and adherence to institutional protocols. By recognizing and addressing these factors, healthcare organizations can empower nurses to make informed decisions, prioritize patient care effectively, and optimize outcomes for patients in need of urgent medical attention.

Continued investment in nurse education, training, and professional development is essential to enhance nurses' decision-making abilities and equip them with the skills needed to excel in the challenging environment of the emergency department. By fostering a culture of collaboration, communication, and continuous improvement, healthcare institutions can support nurses in delivering high-quality care during triage and beyond, ensuring the best possible outcomes for patients in crisis.

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