

## Hospital public relations and internal communication barriers during the Covid-19 pandemic

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### ABSTRACT

**Background:** Covid-19 hit almost all sectors of life, including the economy, tourism, and hospitals. Long queues of patients in the waiting rooms, mandatory use of personal protective equipment, layered masks, maintaining distance in interaction, and use of medical terms in requesting messages to patients are the barriers for medical personnel, especially nurses, in communication with patients. **Purpose:** The current study examined how hospital public relation helps overcome communication barriers between nurses and patients. The study was conducted at PKU Muhammadiyah Hospital Surakarta, accredited with 6-star KARS as a provincial referral hospital for COVID-19 patients and has the highest patient occupancy in Surakarta. **Methods:** It is a descriptive qualitative study. **Conclusion:** By using Dozier and Broom's theory regarding the role of PR, this study proved that PR successfully helps overcome internal communication barriers experienced by nurses and patients. It plays as an expert advisor by providing input to hospital management and bridging the communication between nurses and patients. PR also acts as a problem solver by providing training on communicating correctly. **Implications:** Communication barriers can be overcome if nurses have good communication skills and understanding. As a support for the hospital system, PR provides regular communication training for nurses struggling to serve patients during the covid-19 pandemic.

**Keywords:** Public relations; role; communication barriers; nurse; covid-19

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## INTRODUCTION

The phenomenon of the corona virus has devastated various sectors of life. The economic and tourism sectors are considered the hardest hit by the outbreak of this virus. The presence of the Covid-19 virus has the order of hospital health service protocols. Hospital workers experience fear and anxiety because they are the closest and in direct contact with COVID-19 patients. Not only doctors, nurses, or pharmaceutical technical personnel but also the board of directors, public relations and hospital managers feel the same way. Even, some perceive that hospital is considered the most unsafe place during the Covid-19 pandemic. Health workers are at the forefront of the fight against the Covid-19 pandemic with all its limitations. Ready or not, hospitals must strive to provide the best service amid the increasing rate of transmission of this virus (Abdulla et al., 2022). Not only health workers but hospital public relations have also experienced major crises. This is a formidable challenge how hospitals must keep showing a safe image for patients, either Covid-19 patients or not. It is undeniable that during the COVID-19 pandemic, diverse assumptions towards hospitals spread, especially in dealing with COVID-19 patients. There is a stigma of non-covid patients who are 'divided' or convicted of

contracting the Covid-19 virus by the hospital after an examination; some are unwilling to take a swab test at the beginning of their visit, and many more problems that have arisen into turmoil in the hospital (Konlan et al., 2021). The high number of patients makes health workers, especially nurses, overwhelmed in caring for patients. On the other hand, health workers are always required to remain tough and responsive to the patient's condition, but there are many obstacles faced by health workers, especially nurses who are in contact with patients at any time. Communication barriers often occur in the process of treating patients during the pandemic. Nurses are the backbone of the service quality of a hospital because they have to provide nursing assistance to patients for 24 hours non-stop for assessments, diagnosis, intervention, implementation, and evaluation (Zendrato & Sri Hariyati, 2018). The nursing process cannot be separated from communication to the patient and the patient's family. During the pandemic, nurses and patients encountered communication barriers. The communication model formulated by Harold D. Lasswell reads: who, says what, in which channel, to whom, with what effect. The communication model includes: (i) who conveys, (ii) what is conveyed, (iii) through what channel, (iv) to whom, and (v) what is the effect (Vardhani & Tyas, 2019). The five aspects of the communication model

can affect the success of the communication process between medical personnels and patients or patients' families. For example, the background of the communicator in this case, the nurse, will affect the style of speech, the delivery, and so on. Also, the communicator's background will affect him in processing and interpreting messages (Littlejohn et al., 2017). Public relations practitioners are currently expected to map and find out the problems of the organization, including when dealing with diverse characteristics of stakeholders (Anisa et al., 2021).

Among other medical personnels, nurses have the capacity to meet patients the most for either giving medicine or injections, especially ICU patients who must be observed for 24 hours. In addition, nurses should also communicate with patients, from greeting when they first enter the room, asking complaints, to conveying conditions and further actions to take (Neli Anzani et al., 2020).

Communication that occurs between nurses and patients is therapeutic communication, carried out by nurses during the patient's healing process from illness (Marpaung, 2020). Therapeutic communication is a prominent part of patient care in any conditions. However, when the COVID-19 pandemic hit with very high transmission rate, nurses are required to carry out health protocols, which affects

also therapeutic communication to patients. The use of personal protective equipment (PPE), layered masks, maintaining distance, and other medical terms unfamiliar to the patient or the patient's family hinder the communication. This is the cause of the delay in the communication process. Communication barriers refer to anything that can distort the message and prevent the communicant from receiving a message. Damayanti & Purnamasari (2019) suggested three kinds of communication barriers: (1) technical barriers, which include the lack of technical infrastructure needed in the communication process. It can happen when nurses use personal protective clothing (PPE) and layered masks and are required to maintain a distance during communication with patients or patients' families. (2) Semantic barrier, which is caused by misinterpretation. This barrier may occur when nurses convey information to patients or their families using special medical terms that are only known by doctors or other health workers (Soyusiawaty & Choirul, 2017). Therefore, the patient or the patient's family cannot catch the information conveyed by the nurse. These barriers also often arise during communication between doctors and patients. (3) Behavioral barriers, or so-called humanitarian barriers, which are caused by the attitude of the interlocutor and the communicator. The obstacle is that the nurse

begins to raise her voice when the patient asks. It is a problem when the nurses are perceived disrespectful in terms of delivering health information to patients and their families. Public relation is responsible for overcoming this communication barrier (Pashar et al., 2020). Dozier and Broom noted that public relations practitioners play as intermediaries, assisting management by creating opportunities to hear what the public has to say and creating opportunities for the public to hear what management expects (Rosady Ruslan, 2014). They should be sensitive listeners and brokers (intermediary), interpreters, and communication mediators between the organization and publics (Maulidia, 2020). Public relations are in charge of overcoming the obstacles experienced by health workers, especially nurses with all their limitations in handling patients or communicating with patients' families during the pandemic. A public relation minimizes the crisis in the hospital.

Public relation maintains two-way communication and facilitates communication by removing barriers in relationships and keeping communication channels open. In addition, it acts as a source of information and an interpreter of communication between the organization and the public. The goal is to provide the information needed by management and the public to make decisions in the common

interest (Cutlip et al., 2013). Public relations must be a mediator in bridging communication barriers between nurses and patients or patients' families when a conflict friction is encountered.

The city of Solo began to impose restrictions on community activities including teaching and learning activities at the elementary school to high school level on Monday 16 March 2020 (SK Disdik Central Java, 2020) where the Covid-19 virus had spread and hospitals were required to be ready to face the pandemic at that time. Whether the hospital were ready or not, Covid-19 patient started to come over (Afrilia & Christiani, 2020). PKU Muhammadiyah Hospital Surakarta is one of the referral hospitals for Covid-19 patients. By achievements as a hospital with plenary international accreditation, with very strict health protocols, all health workers and the board of directors tried to provide excellent services even though they had a feeling of anxiety and worry for the undefined characteristics of the positive Covid-19 (Tangel et al., 2019).

Based on the description, this study formulated the role of a public relations officers at the PKU Muhamadiyah Hospital in Surakarta in helping nurses and patients overcome communication barriers during the Covid-19 pandemic, especially in June-July 2020 with a high number of infected in the city of Surakarta. The communication barriers

included misunderstandings in providing information or messages from nurses as communicators to patients and patients' families as communicants, due to the selection of unfamiliar dictions. If this communication barrier persists, without immediate problem-solving steps, it will affect the reputation of the hospital. Plus, the oblique accusations reported by the media that often corner the hospital, especially in handling covid-19 patients, such as news about patients who were sentenced to not be infected with Ccovid-19, but from the hospital they were included in Covid-19 patients and, not transparent the hospital in providing information related to the condition of patients in isolation, there are still many other problems (Ishak, 2012). The duties of a hospital public relations officer is to improve the positive image of the institution. The public relations division has a major task to manage communications within an organization, including crisis management communications. Actions taken by public relations focus on crisis preparation as a strategy to minimize damage to the company's reputation (Yulianti & Boer, 2020).

This study is intended to find out how public relations can effectively help health workers overcome internal communication barriers with patients or patients' families, so they can provide quality service in hospitals and

increase patient comfort and safety to visit the hospital. Because not all hospital visitors are in a condition with emergency treatment, visitors might only come for routine medical check-ups, rehabilitation, or follow-up care after surgery. Therefore, public relations must be able to create a safe atmosphere for all patients (Puspitasari & Afifi, 2022).

## RESEARCH METHOD

This research was conducted at the PKU Muhamamdiyah Hospital in Surakarta City from June to July 2020 with the highest occupancy rate of patient visits during the Covid-19 pandemic, based on data from the Medical Record Bureau. This study used a qualitative descriptive research design. Qualitative research is a research process to understand human or social phenomena by creating a comprehensive and complex picture presented in words, reporting detailed views obtained from informants, and carried out in a natural setting (Fadli, 2021). Descriptive research provides a systematic, factual, and accurate description of the facts and characteristics of a particular population or area. The primary data were collected through field observations, interviews, and discussions. The informants of this study were medical nurses who served in outpatient wards and public relations managers at PKU

Muhammadiyah Hospital, Surakarta City. It employed a purposive sampling technique estimated to represent the research population. The sources of the primary data were derived from field observations of the activities of the public relations managers and nurses on duty in the outpatient ward. Meanwhile, those of the secondary data were documents and literature that support this research. To maintain the quality of informants, researchers took five nurses selected based on the length of work experience with a period of 5-10 years. To find a valid result, qualitative research data should have gone through a validity test (Mekarisce, 2020). Data were tested for validity by doing observation and increasing accuracy in research at PKU Muhammadiyah Hospital, Surakarta. Reliability in qualitative research is multifaceted, dynamic, so nothing is consistent and repeated as before, namely by continuously observation over the behavior and activities of the selected nurse. Therefore, the data obtained were considered credible. Qualitative data analysis should also be carried out interactively, directly, and continuously until they are saturated. To analyze the data, the researchers used 3 (three) stages: data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing and verification (Rodiah et al., 2018).

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Covid-19 not only affected economic and tourism sectors but also changed the order of procedures in hospital services. Those massive effects happened unexpected that health workers were quite unready to deal with Covid-19. Therefore, communication barriers were very likely to occur. Nurses as health workers at the forefront of hospitals not only treated Covid-19 patients but also patients with symptoms of other diseases (Oktavianus Plewan et al., 2019). The high bed occupancy rate (BOR) in hospitals made it difficult for health workers to treat patients.

**Table 1 Data on Human Resources at PKU Muhammadiyah Hospital Surakarta**

No	Information	Amount
Permanent employee		
1	Non Medical	306
2	Medical Support (pharmacy, radiology, laboratory)	90
3	Doctor	34
4	Nurse Paramedic	294
5	Midwife Paramedic	42
6	Physiotherapy Paramedic	5
Non-Permanent Employees (Partners, Matches, Honorary)		
7	Doctor	72
8	Medical support	1
9	Nurse Paramedic	5
10	Non Medical	1
Total		850

Source: PPSDM PKU Hospital, 2020



Along with the new rules to avoid a high risk of Covid-19 virus transmission, all health workers were required to implement very strict health protocols during service to patients, such as using personal protective equipment (PPE), masks and maintaining distance when interacting, especially with patients. Personally, the barriers to communication had been felt by nurses upon adapting to this pattern of health protocols. Nurses must be able to adapt to the current regulatory conditions by the government. In the process of communication between nurses and patients, one of them is therapeutic communication, where Expert J.A. Devito, explained three dimensions always involved during the communication process, namely physical, social, psychological aspects, and they cannot be separated during communication. Physical means that there must be eye contact during communication. Social means inseparable relationships with other people. Psychological aspect means understanding the patient's psychological condition. One of the therapeutic communication techniques, repeating messages to patients so that they are easy to understand, perfecting steps or actions, arrangements in communicating or approaches, so they are not saturated and frightening patients, and emphasis on getting the patient's attention (Dulwahab et al., 2020).

Communication barriers experienced by

medical personnels, especially nurses with patients, often lead to a negative feedback from patients or their families on the image of the hospital because nurses interact directly with patients or their families. This is the highlight of how public relations in the hospital helps overcome communication barriers between nurses with patients.

PKU Muhammadiyah Hospital in Surakarta is a Type B hospital, the provincial reference for health services. It is located at Ronggowarsito Street No 130 Timuran Banjarsari Surakarta City, with the achievement of the International Plenary Hospital accreditation in 2020. During the pandemic, this hospital continues to provide excellent services not only for Covid-19 patients but also general patients. A Public Relations Manager stated,

“PKU Muhammadiyah Hospital Surakarta holds tight the principle that people who come to the hospital are not only people who are experiencing a sick condition and are then treated or people with emergencies must get treatment immediately, but also healthy people who just come for medical check-ups or patients who are in post-rehabilitation”, (informant 1)

Therefore, the hospital is required to provide maximum service and a sense of security and comfort for visitors of either Covid or non-Covid-19 patients.

Public Relations plays a vital role during the pandemic, who shows a positive image with a sense of security and comfort in hospital

**Table 2 Outpatient Patient Data at PKU Muhammadiyah Hospital Surakarta**

No	Information	Amount
Outpatient		
1	New Patient	16.831
2	Old Patient	91.522
Total Visits		108.353

Source: PKU Hospital RM Data, 2020

**Table 3 Inpatient Patient Data at PKU Muhammadiyah Hospital Surakarta**

No	Information	Amount
Outpatient		
1	New Patient	5.735
2	Old Patient	11.698
Total Visits		17.433

Source: PKU Hospital RM Data, 2020

services. According to Dozier and Broom (cited in Ruslan, 2014), there are four categories of Public Relations roles: (1) Expert Advisor or Expert Prescriber, (2) Communication Facilitator, (3) Problem Solving Process Facilitator, (4) Communication Technician.

In carrying out the role as an expert prescriber or expert advisor, the public relations of PKU Muhammadiyah Hospital diagnosed the obstacles then provided recommended actions to the hospital management, provided appropriate solutions to solve the communication barriers between nurses and patients or patients' families. Public Relations provides alternative input to management related to service improvement to the minimize the communication barriers

between medical personnels and patients or between medical personnels and other employees. As stated,

"The manager of public relations information and foreign relations oversees the service and complaints unit so that things that are not pleasing in the hospital service process become the responsibility of public relations as well as advisors from problems or obstacles that occur and provide advice to management to improve the quality of service from the complaint", (informant 1)

One of the communication barriers experienced by nurses is conveyed as in the following excerpt,

"when we need to provide an explanation of health information, a result of a diagnosis from the doctor's examination, we must use personal protective equipment, wear a layered mask, keep distanced. It is quite difficult, even sometimes we have to repeat it several times". (informant 2)

This is what causes the communication to be unsmooth, unable to convey the message perfectly to the patient or the patient's family. It might have caused misunderstandings and eventually conflicts between the patient and the nurse. The service time for patients or the relatively short consultation time and conditions in the hospital room also led to the communication barriers. Nurses did not only handle one patient. In addition, if the doctor's patient queue was very long, internal factors such as fatigue also affected the communication process. If the patient felt uncomfortable when



receiving information or medical information, such as the nurse's voice unheard clearly, or seemed to snap because the nurse had to increase the volume once providing explanation for wearing personal protective equipment (PPE) and layered mask. However, they sometimes considered the nurse's voice rude because she used a high tone, not to mention the use or selection of terms by nurses when conveying health information to patients. Sometimes, they unconsciously used medical terms which were familiar only for health workers. Patients' backgrounds were very diverse from age range, level of education, economic factors, that not all medical term information are well understood. It caused internal communication barriers and ended in conflict. Public Relations then provided input to hospital management by training for nurses, so the services remain excellent. The training was in the form of workshops related to good communication techniques when using personal protective equipment (PPE) and layered masks to sound polite and gentle.

Public relations become a mediator when health workers encounter communication barriers, mediating nurses and patients or patients' families for misunderstandings in the communication process. This is in line with the result of the interview with the Manager of Public Relations, Information and Foreign Relations, PKU Muhammadiyah Hospital,

Surakarta,

"That Public Relations at PKU Muhammadiyah Hospital Surakarta in carrying out one of its duties, namely to become a communication facilitator as a mediator between conflicting parties, another term that is often used is that Public Relations serves as a firefighter if there is a conflict in the institution, conflict or crisis does not only occur between nurses. with patients but also often occurs in pharmacy installations with patients usually pharmacists must repeat information on instructions for use or consumption of drugs to patients during the process of delivering drugs to pharmacy installations, this also occurs when communication between doctors and patients is created again where communication barriers are created from language misunderstanding." (Informant 1)

Using personal protective equipment and layered masks and maintaining a distance during communication commonly leads to misunderstandings, and it must be handled immediately by public relations to maintain the hospital's excellent service. Public Relations must act as a good mediator and provide reciprocal information from both the hospital and the patient. When the patient feels that he or she does not receive valid health information from the nurse, there must communication barriers between them. Immediately, public relations sit them together to create a sense of mutual trust, respect, and support. Public Relations of PKU Muhammadiyah Hospital in Surakarta provides a balanced mediation to overcome communication barriers.

Apart from the condition, the communication

barriers are also caused by language terms which are sometimes unfamiliar to the patients. Therefore, they must adjust to the background of each patient appropriately because it greatly affects internal communication barriers. The nurses should know who the interlocutor is in that they must know the age, education, and occupation.

The third role is related to Broom's theory that a public relation must be a problem solver. When communication barriers arise, a crisis also occurs. By then, public relation is required to complete the crisis handling process. Within internal communication barriers, public relation provides a solution, namely organizing a training for nurses on effectively communication. The training is for not only nurses but also units that have a direct contact with patients at the PKU Muhammadiyah Hospital, Surakarta, such as the pharmaceutical installation and the complaints and hospital services section. The training also covers how to speak correctly, so it is easily understood. Besides, the training also covers how to use the right language or medical terms because word choice greatly affects the communication process. The lack of time when providing information is also an obstacle because the patient or the patient's family does not have the opportunity to ask more detail and usually tends to only say a sentence of approval during a consultation with a doctor. The lack of

time for communication is certainly influenced by the long queue of patients. Situations where hospitals are also unable to overcome this because doctors with a large number of patients are usually very minimal in consultation or conveying information for a long duration of time. According to the Public Relations of PKU Muhammadiyah Hospital, Surakarta City, the average duration of a patient communication with a doctor is only about 3-5 minutes in such conditions, requiring nurses to provide more information about the results of the examination of the patient's condition or the flow of what they should do after the examination. Usually, patients ask questions after leaving the doctor's room, making deeper communication to nurses about their health conditions, confirming information from doctors so that they feel more confident with the information. This situation can create communication barriers between patients and nurses (Detik health, 2011). Not to mention the psychological pressure the nurses feel because of the use of personal protective equipment that makes it difficult for activities even just to drink or defecate to the restroom, patient queues are still long, plus several requests from doctors that must be done immediately, and deadlines for making patient administrative reports.

To overcome these internal communication barriers, public relations as a communication

technician is in charge of making informative writings, such as wall magazines and banners installed in each service unit containing health information, flow of care services to patients, calls for healthy living or doctor consultation schedules. They are installed in the cardiologist service unit at PKU Muhammadiyah Surakarta Hospital which contains the flow of examination services for BPJS patients as well as information about heart disease, so patients after the examination know the steps to take, for example taking medication at the pharmacy. The informative writing is provided to reduce the barriers to internal communication between patients and nurses.

Based on the description above, a column can be made to clarify the role of public relations as well as the implementation and evaluation of communication barriers experienced by medical personnel, especially nurses with patients and patients' families. If the patients feel the information are clear, the satisfaction with the hospital services will increase and they will return to the hospital for another checkup.

## CONCLUSION

During the COVID-19 pandemic, public relations of the PKU Muhamadiyah Hospital, Surakarta City, plays a vital role in overcoming communication barriers between nurses and patients or patients' families.

Internal communication barriers arise from the communication process between the nurse and the patient or the patient's family during the examination. The obstacles experienced are technical barriers, semantic barriers, and behavioral barriers. The communication barriers occur for the use of personal protective equipment, masks, keeping distanced during the communication. Barriers also happen in the use of language and the choice of words or medical terms that often create misunderstandings.

Public relation plays as an expert advisor, providing input to hospital management on complaints. Besides, PR also acts as a problem solver, offering solutions to crises in services. Furthermore, they provide training on good communication techniques to nurses or other health workers. As a mediator, they mediate the conflicts between nurses and patients to create mutual trust and common understanding. As a communication technician, they provide informative writings in the examination room, such as wall boards and banners about health appeals, service flows or information on doctor's consultation schedules.

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