Autonomy: IT Advancement in Healthcare Organizations

Dallas Bradley

Methodist University

Delivery of autonomous practice is the fundamental cornerstone for which all dimensions of the healthcare profession base clinical decisions. According to Randi Skar (2010) in his article *The Meaning of Autonomy in Nursing Practice*, “Professional autonomy means having the authority to make decisions and the freedom to act in accordance with one’s professional knowledge base” (pg. 2226). Although knowledge acquired through education forms the skeleton of traditional professional autonomy, the meat lies within critical thinking, commitment for better patient outcomes, and previous clinical experience. However, with information technology rapidly evolving, delivery of autonomous practice has grown in complexity with the addition of this nontraditional component. With this evolutionary change in the processes of healthcare delivery, the concept of CDSS (Clinical Decision Support Systems) has been introduced in order to aid healthcare professionals in the provision of quality care, management, and autonomous practice. Utilizing education, critical thinking, and information technology together will help best determine the degree of decision autonomy in clinical circumstances while also optimizing healthcare delivery.

Before the advancement and integration of technology, “healthcare professionals (traditionally) relied on the concept of autonomy, personal drive, responsibility, commitment to greater patient outcomes, and their own personal knowledge database to drive their clinical decisions (Brown, Patrick, & Pasupathy, 2012, pg. 68). However, professionals in the healthcare field have a responsibility to stay up-to-date with changes in the system. Brown, Patrick, & Pasupathy (2012) state that “health professions also have a social obligation to recognize, accommodate, and lead the application of IT, which has considerable capacity to transform work processes and thus the traditional health professional role” (pg. 69). With information technology changing delivery of patient care, professionals have no choice but to fulfill their “social responsibility” (Brown, Patrick, & Pasupathy, 2012, pg. 69) and maintain and utilize a solid IT knowledge base in order to optimize autonomy in their practice. The authors further state that provision of “this autonomy (coupled with a strong, ethical commitment to quality) manifests itself in the professional’s drive to achieve high education, pursue continuing education, ensure work competency, and structure the clinical processes around the needs of individual patients” (Brown, Patrick, & Pasupathy, 2012, pg. 68). In relation to the professional’s IT knowledge base, importance lies within the phrase “ensuring work competency.” As described by Brown, Patrick, & Pasupathy, advancement of technology has and will continue to change the role of a health professional. Utilizing the component of clinical decision support tools help bridge this gap between traditional autonomous practice and IT advancement in the healthcare setting.

Clinical decision support tools provide clinical guidelines and protocols to help support the professional in decision-making and clinical judgment. However, it is important to understand that CDSS is merely a compliment to the “traditional” aspects of clinical decision-making in autonomous practice. Skar states that “nursing practice is becoming more diverse because of rapid changes and demands in the healthcare sector and it is important to question whether development of nurse autonomy depends on specialized workplace settings rather than on generic professional hallmarks and capabilities” (Skar, 2010,pg. 2227). With healthcare profession logistics growing in complexity, optimal clinical judgment now requires a tactful combination of more components, therefore, demanding a more rigorous skill set from the healthcare professional. To answer Skar’s question, Brown, Patrick, & Pasupathy explain that “IT provides professionals the capacity to focus on complex processes and to integrate their roles to provide superior outcomes…and IT provides decision support in the form of clinical protocols that are based on redesigned structures” (Brown, Patrick, & Pasupathy, 2012, pg. 69). This establishes that while an IT knowledge base is an important support component, autonomy only truly manifests when all of these factors, traditional and nontraditional, are integrated tactfully and effectively to obtain the best patient outcome. As such, these support tools should become part of the healthcare professional’s knowledge base and used along with the “traditional” skill sets to ensure provision of optimal autonomous practice.

Although traditional skill set, knowledge base, and critical thinking have optimized autonomous practice in the past, information technology has opened a gateway to more complex sciences. As a profession committed to consistently improving patient outcomes, the healthcare system must adapt to and effectively utilize these technology tools. Importance in tactfully using all resources, traditional and nontraditional, is imperative to delivery of optimal autonomous practice. The bottom line is that the degree of decision autonomy lies within integrating these contributing factors to produce transcendent patient outcomes.

References

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