

CASE REPORT



BACKGROUND TO THE REPORT

This report will be based on the case study from the Glynafonshire Health Board's case in October 2025. The report is regarding the district nurses' hand washing adherence. Although the district nurses were subjected to a strict handwashing policy, it was discovered that there were still nurses that did not adhere to the policy that was put in place by the Glynafonshire Health Board. Although the nurses were taught the proper handwashing techniques and its importance during their training, there were still nurses that did not follow the proper techniques, some nurses rushed through their hand-washing, and some nurses did not wash their hands in between visiting and caring for their patients. Although the importance of the handwashing policy was informed and taught to all the nurses in the Glynafonshire district, some nurses were still not adhering to the policy. Therefore, this report intends to understand the psychology of the nurses and to use a psychological theory to explain the nurses' lack of adherence to the handwashing policy.

THE COGNITIVE LOAD THEORY

According to cognitive load theory, many traditional educational strategies fail to account for the constraints of human cognitive design, overloading the learner's working memory, the key "bottleneck" of his or her cognitive system (Schnotz & Kürschner, 2007). Schnotz & Kürschner (2007) also stated that a differentiation was established within cognitive load, identifying burden stemming from the inherent qualities of the learning task (intrinsic load) and load arising from the instructional format (extraneous load), rather than from the task's intrinsic attributes. Therefore, the cognitive load theory would explain that the nurses in the Gynafonshire district did not adhere to the handwashing policy strictly as they were facing too much intrinsic load or extraneous load which would distract them cognitively from washing their hands exactly according to the handwashing policy. According to Ginns and Leppink (2019), when cognitive load is excessive due to the conflicting requirements of various activities, the cognitive load theory posits that learning is hindered. Although there are numerous consequences of cognitive load theory, they all aim to maximise working memory load in order to support the accumulation of information stored in long-term memory (Sweller, 2024).

HOW DOES THE THEORY RELATE TO THE CASE STUDY

The nurses in the Glynafonshire district were under immense stress due to the shortage of nurses in the district as well as the increase in number of individuals requiring care within the Glynafonshire district. Therefore, the nurses in the district were under intense cognitive load. As mentioned, the increase in cognitive load would cause an individual to miss out on certain details. As the nurses had to rush between the high number of patients requiring care, it caused them to be under intense cognitive load which in return caused them to be so hyper-focused on seeing to their patients that they had either forgot to wash their hands according to the handwashing policy, or that they were rushing so much that the nurses were not as meticulous with their handwashing as per the policy. Although every single nurse in the Glynafonshire district is aware and understand the handwashing policy, due to the increase of cognitive load that they were in due to the lack of manpower amongst the nurses in the district, they did not wash their hands as meticulously as the handwashing policy required them to.

SUGGESTIONS FOR NEW PROCEDURES BASED ON THE THEORY

A suggestion for the Glynafonshire district would be for them to increase the manpower in order for them to not be under such heavy cognitive loads. As the cognitive load decreases, the nurses are able to adhere to the handwashing policy better. This would prevent another case of a life lost due to the lack of adherence to the handwashing policy.

Besides that, another suggestion would be to increase the time in between patients. As the nurses take more time to transition between patients, it lessens their cognitive load slightly which is enough for them to remember as well as have time to wash their hands meticulously according to the handwashing policy.

EVALUATION AND CRITIQUE OF THEORY

Although the Cognitive Load Theory does explain the nurses lack of adherence to the handwashing policy during intense cognitive load due to the lack of manpower in the Glynafonshire district, it does not explain why the nurses would be forgetting to wash their hands as per the handwashing policy, even though it should have been part of their standard operating procedures. Even though the nurses would be incredibly stressed during the busy moments in the healthcare industry, it does not explain the nurses' negligence for not adhering to the handwashing policy.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In conclusion, the Cognitive Load Theory does explain partially regarding the nurses' lack of adherence to the handwashing policy set by the Glynafonshire district, there are still many aspects to explore regarding their negligence as well as their inability to follow their standard operating procedure.

Even though it is understandable that under immense cognitive load, there are other cognitive theories that may explain why the nurses do not adhere to the handwashing policy.

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