

Formative Evaluation of Forum Theatre to Promote Safer Service Co-Design in Maternity Care

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Background: Shared decision-making in maternity care is often compromised by constraints such as time pressure, limited health literacy, and information overload. Traditional approaches to service design may not sufficiently address these challenges. Forum theatre offers an experiential, participatory method to explore and improve communication and service delivery.

Objectives: To evaluate the feasibility and perceived impact of using forum theatre as a formative tool to inform service design and decision aid development for maternity consultations, with a focus on large-for-gestational-age (LGA) pregnancies.

Methods: This pilot study employed a co-production approach involving maternity service users, clinicians, and third-sector representatives. A structured decision aid was developed following IPDAS standards and integrated into a live forum theatre enactment facilitated by professional actors. The scenario portrayed a consultation regarding induction of labour for LGA. Freeze-frame techniques enabled participants to pause the action and suggest alternative communication strategies. Data were collected through structured observations, participant feedback forms, and group discussions. Qualitative data were thematically analysed and quantitative responses were summarised descriptively.

Results: Participants reported high emotional engagement and found the enactment realistic and insightful. Key communication challenges were identified, including use of medical jargon, insufficient empathy, and rushed consultations. The audience proposed practical service redesign strategies such as scheduling follow-up consultations and improving continuity of care. Participants overwhelmingly agreed that forum theatre enhanced their understanding of decision-making dynamics and could inform both clinician training and service development.

Conclusion: Forum theatre is a promising formative method for identifying barriers in shared decision-making and engaging stakeholders in co-designing safer, patient-centred maternity services. Findings support further refinement and scale-up of this creative methodology in clinical training and service innovation. Communication and service-related factors impact patient safety; improving these will impact women's care and outcomes.

Formative Evaluation of Forum Theatre to Promote Safer Service CoDesign in Maternity Care

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Abstract

Background:

Shared decision-making in maternity care is often compromised by constraints such as time pressure, limited health literacy, and information overload. Traditional approaches to service design may not sufficiently address these challenges. Forum theatre offers an experiential, participatory method to explore and improve communication and service delivery.

Objectives:

To evaluate the feasibility and perceived impact of using forum theatre as a formative tool to inform service design and decision aid development for maternity consultations, with a focus on large-for-gestational-age (LGA) pregnancies

Methodology:

Artefact Development: Created a decision aid for induction vs. expectant management in large-for-gestational-age pregnancies.

Scenario Design: Script addressing time, information overload, and health literacy, co-developed with Performing Medicine team.

Co-production Team: Multidisciplinary group of service users, clinicians, and third-sector representatives.

Enactment: Performance by professional actors; freeze-frame used for audience input.

Refinement: Feedback integrated into script; re-enactment and service redesign discussion.

Evaluation: Observations, feedback forms, and discussions analysed thematically and descriptively.

Results:

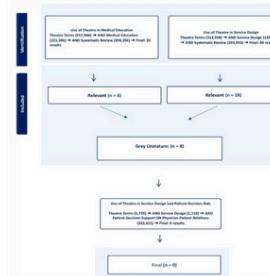
- Participants felt emotionally engaged and found the enactment realistic and relatable.
- The exercise was seen as highly valuable for clinician training and service design.
- Feedback highlighted the challenges between the amount of information provided, the time available to provide it, and the needs of people with different levels of health literacy.
- Participants overwhelmingly agreed that forum theatre enhanced their understanding of decision-making dynamics and could inform both clinician training and service development.

Conclusion:

Forum theatre is a promising formative method for identifying barriers in shared decision-making and engaging stakeholders in co-designing safer, patient-centered maternity services. Findings support further refinement and scale-up of this creative methodology in clinical training and service innovation. Communication and service-related factors impact patient safety; improving these will impact women's care and outcomes.

Results

1 Scoping Literature review: Use of Forum Theatre in service design and patient decision aids



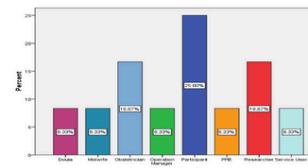
2 Steps in Methodology



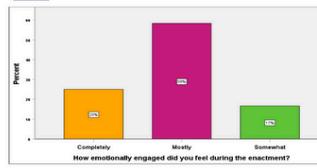
3 Ethnographic Observations of the Forum Theatre Enactment

| Theme | Ethnographic Observations of the Forum Theatre Enactment |
|---|--|
| Communication Issues Identified | The enactment vividly portrayed the difficulty of conveying the information to someone who was not expecting to be confronted with the decision at the end of a busy clinic and led to a discussion of ways of mitigating the problem. |
| Impact of Forum Theatre | Audience actively intervened during freeze-frames; successive iterations showed need for reassurance, and checking patient understanding and developing strategies to allow time for reflection, provision of written materials/leaflets and re-scheduling appointments when a family member or friend can attend. |
| Audience Engagement and Reactions | High level of engagement; audience critically challenged communication styles; recognition of emotional cues and power dynamics. |
| Challenges Highlighted | Recognition that systemic issues (e.g., time pressures, service structures) also influence consultations and cannot be fully addressed by interpersonal strategies alone. |
| Recommendations from Audience | Prioritise rapport-building, making eye contact, de-escalating stressful situations, ensuring patients feel reassured, and allowing for a second consultation before a decision is made. |
| Observations about Simulation Structure | Good actor preparation improved realism; audience diversity and influenced discussions on different aspects. |
| Skills Development Needed | Healthcare professionals need education and training in communicating risk and handling patient decision-making conversations effectively. |

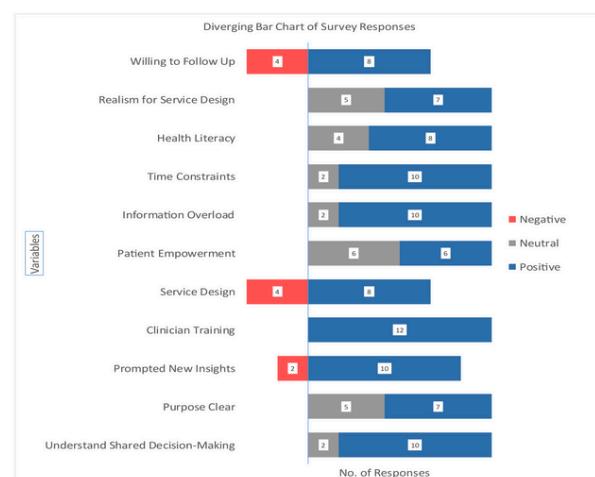
4 Role of participants in session



5 Emotional engagement during enactment



6 Diverging bar chart of survey responses



Key Clinical Implications:

- Combining decision aids with participatory theatre generates actionable insights that can be directly integrated into maternity service workflows to improve shared decision-making and patient experience.