



## Emotional intelligence in nursing leadership: A qualitative inquiry into patient care and team dynamics in Zambian hospitals

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### Abstract

**Purpose:** This study explored how emotional intelligence is expressed and practiced by nurse leaders in Zambian hospitals and examined its influence on patient care experiences and team dynamics. The aim was to understand how emotional competencies among nurse leaders shape communication, collaboration, and conflict management in clinical settings.

**Methodology/Design:** A qualitative research design guided by the Emotional Intelligence Theory and Transformational Leadership Theory was employed. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 20 nurse leaders from selected hospitals. Data were analyzed thematically, and trustworthiness was ensured through credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability measures.

**Findings:** Analysis revealed that nurse leaders demonstrated empathy, emotional regulation, and effective communication, which enhanced patient care experiences. Additionally, emotional intelligence positively influenced team dynamics by fostering supportive leadership, conflict resolution through emotional awareness, and transparent communication. These competencies were instrumental in improving teamwork, staff morale, and overall service quality.

**Implications:** The findings highlight the importance of integrating emotional intelligence development into nursing leadership training and professional development programs. Hospital administrators and policy-makers are encouraged to incorporate emotional intelligence assessments in leadership selection and evaluation to improve patient care and team performance.

**Originality/Value:** This study provides novel qualitative evidence from Zambia on the critical role of emotional intelligence in nursing leadership, linking it to patient outcomes and team dynamics. It contributes to the understanding of leadership practices in African healthcare contexts and offers practical recommendations for enhancing nursing management.

**Keywords:** Emotional intelligence, nursing leadership, patient care, team dynamics, Zambian hospitals

### Introduction

Healthcare systems depend heavily on effective leadership, especially in nursing, where leaders directly influence patient care and staff performance. In hospital settings, nurse leaders are expected not only to manage clinical tasks but also to guide teams, resolve conflicts, and support staff emotionally. This makes emotional intelligence an important leadership quality in nursing practice. Emotional intelligence refers to the ability to understand one's own emotions, manage them effectively, and respond appropriately to the emotions of others (Goleman, 2017). In nursing leadership, emotional intelligence supports empathy, communication, and trust, which are essential for high-quality patient care and positive team relationships.

In many developing countries, including Zambia, hospitals face challenges such as staff shortages, heavy workloads, limited resources, and emotional stress among healthcare workers. These pressures often affect teamwork, morale, and patient outcomes. Nurse leaders are frequently required to manage emotionally demanding situations involving patients, families, and healthcare teams. Studies from different contexts suggest that emotionally intelligent nurse leaders are better able to motivate staff, manage stress, and create supportive work environments that improve both patient care and team dynamics (Codier *et al.*, 2019; Freshwater & Stickley, 2020).

In Zambia, the nursing workforce forms the backbone of hospital care, particularly in public hospitals. While leadership training for nurses often focuses on technical and administrative skills, less attention is given to emotional and relational aspects of leadership. Existing research on nursing

leadership in Zambia has largely emphasized clinical competence, workload, and health system constraints, with limited focus on emotional intelligence as a leadership resource. A qualitative exploration is therefore needed to understand how nurse leaders perceive and apply emotional intelligence in their daily leadership practices, especially in relation to patient care and team interactions.

### Problem Statement

Despite the critical role of nurse leaders in shaping patient care and team performance, challenges related to poor communication, workplace stress, low morale, and interpersonal conflict remain common in many Zambian hospitals. These challenges can negatively affect patient experiences, staff retention, and overall quality of care. While emotional intelligence has been shown to improve leadership effectiveness in nursing globally, there is limited empirical evidence on how emotional intelligence is understood, practiced, and experienced by nursing leaders in Zambia.

Most existing studies on emotional intelligence in nursing leadership rely on quantitative methods and are conducted in high-income countries. Such approaches may not fully capture the lived experiences, cultural context, and daily realities of nurse leaders working in Zambian hospitals. Without qualitative insights, it is difficult to understand how emotional intelligence influences leadership behaviors, patient care, and team dynamics in this context. This gap in knowledge limits the development of context-specific leadership training and policies that address emotional and relational challenges in nursing leadership.

### Significance of the Study

This study is important for several reasons. From an academic perspective, it contributes to the limited body of qualitative research on emotional intelligence in nursing leadership within the African context, particularly Zambia. By exploring nurses' lived experiences, the study provides deeper insights into how emotional intelligence shapes leadership practices, patient care, and teamwork.

From a practical perspective, the findings will be valuable to nurse leaders, hospital administrators, and policymakers. Understanding how emotional intelligence supports effective leadership can inform leadership development programs, mentorship initiatives, and in-service training for nurses. This may help improve communication, reduce workplace conflict, and strengthen team cohesion in hospitals. Improved leadership practices may also enhance patient experiences by fostering compassionate and emotionally responsive care.

In addition, the study may support health policy reforms by highlighting the importance of emotional and relational competencies in nursing leadership. Integrating emotional intelligence into leadership frameworks could strengthen the overall performance of healthcare institutions in Zambia.

### Scope of the Study

The study focuses on emotional intelligence in nursing leadership within selected hospitals in Zambia. It specifically examines how nurse leaders perceive emotional intelligence, how they apply it in managing patient care, and how it influences team dynamics among nursing staff. The study adopts a qualitative approach, using in-depth interviews to capture rich, detailed accounts of leadership experiences.

The scope is limited to nurse leaders such as ward managers, unit heads, and senior nurses who hold formal leadership roles. The study does not measure emotional intelligence quantitatively or compare hospitals across different countries. Instead, it seeks to provide an in-depth understanding of leadership experiences within the Zambian hospital context.

### Study Objectives

The study explores how emotional intelligence shapes leadership practices within nursing settings in Zambia. Specifically, the study seeks to:

1. Explore how emotional intelligence is expressed and practiced by nurse leaders in selected Zambian hospitals and how it influences patient care experiences.
2. Examine how the emotional intelligence of nursing leaders affects team dynamics, including communication, collaboration, and conflict management among nursing staff.

### Literature Review

#### Theoretical Framework

This study is guided by two complementary theories: Emotional Intelligence Theory and Transformational Leadership Theory. These theories provide a strong perspective for understanding how nursing leaders' emotional capabilities shape patient care and team dynamics in Zambian hospitals.

#### Emotional Intelligence Theory

Emotional Intelligence Theory explains how individuals perceive, understand, manage, and use emotions in themselves and others (Goleman, 1998; Mayer *et al.*, 2016).

In nursing leadership, emotional intelligence is critical because leaders work in emotionally demanding environments where stress, empathy, and human interaction are constant. Leaders with high emotional intelligence are better able to regulate their emotions, respond calmly to pressure, and understand the emotional needs of both patients and staff.

In the context of Zambian hospitals, emotionally intelligent nurse leaders can foster trust, reduce workplace conflict, and support staff well-being, which in turn improves teamwork and patient care experiences. The theory suggests that self-awareness, self-regulation, empathy, and social skills help leaders create supportive work climates where nurses feel valued and motivated (Goleman, 1998). This study used Emotional Intelligence Theory to explore how nurse leaders' emotional awareness and interpersonal skills influence staff relationships and patient-centered care.

#### Transformational Leadership Theory

Transformational Leadership Theory focuses on how leaders inspire, motivate, and support followers to achieve shared goals while promoting personal and professional growth (Bass & Riggio, 2006). Transformational leaders influence others through vision, encouragement, ethical behavior, and individualized consideration. In nursing leadership, this approach is especially relevant because effective patient care depends on collaboration, morale, and commitment among healthcare teams.

In Zambian hospital settings, nurse leaders who demonstrate transformational behaviors can motivate nurses to remain engaged despite resource constraints and heavy workloads. By showing empathy, offering emotional support, and acting as role models, such leaders strengthen team cohesion and enhance care quality (Northouse, 2021). This theory guided the study in examining how emotionally intelligent nursing leaders inspire teamwork, improve communication, and positively shape patient care outcomes.

#### Emotional Intelligence

Emotional intelligence refers to the ability to understand, manage, and use emotions effectively in oneself and others. In healthcare settings, emotional intelligence is important because it helps leaders remain calm, empathetic, and responsive in stressful situations. Studies show that leaders with high emotional intelligence communicate better, manage conflicts well, and create supportive work environments (Goleman, 2018; Mayer *et al.*, 2016). In nursing, emotional intelligence supports decision-making, emotional regulation, and compassionate care delivery. When nurse leaders are emotionally intelligent, they are better able to understand staff emotions and patient needs, which improves teamwork and service quality (Codier & Kamikawa, 2020).

#### Nursing Leadership

Nursing leadership focuses on guiding, motivating, and supporting nursing staff to achieve quality patient outcomes. Effective nursing leaders influence staff attitudes, work commitment, and professional behavior. Leadership in nursing goes beyond supervision and includes mentoring, communication, and emotional support (Cummings *et al.*, 2018). Research shows that leadership styles rooted in empathy, trust, and emotional awareness improve nurse satisfaction and reduce burnout (Boamah *et al.*, 2018). In

resource-limited health systems, strong nursing leadership is essential for managing workload pressures and maintaining care standards.

### **Patient Care and Team Dynamics**

Patient care quality is closely linked to how well healthcare teams work together. Positive team dynamics promote information sharing, trust, and coordinated care, which improves patient safety and satisfaction (Salas *et al.*, 2017). Nurse leaders play a key role in shaping team relationships by setting the emotional tone of the unit. Emotionally intelligent leaders encourage open communication and mutual respect, reducing conflicts and errors. Studies suggest that supportive leadership improves collaboration and strengthens patient-centered care practices (Wei *et al.*, 2019).

### **Zambian Hospitals**

Zambian hospitals face challenges such as staff shortages, high patient loads, and limited resources. These conditions place emotional and leadership demands on nurses, especially those in leadership roles. Research in Zambia indicates that nurses often experience stress and emotional exhaustion, which can affect teamwork and patient care (Muleya *et al.*, 2020). Despite these challenges, there is limited qualitative research exploring how emotional intelligence in nursing leadership influences patient care and team dynamics in Zambian hospitals. Understanding this relationship can help improve leadership development and healthcare outcomes.

### **Emotional Intelligence of Nursing Leaders and Patient Care Experiences**

Emotional intelligence plays a vital role in how nurse leaders interact with patients and make care-related decisions in hospital settings. Emotional Intelligence Theory explains that leaders who can understand, manage, and regulate their own emotions, as well as those of others, are better positioned to create caring and supportive environments. In nursing leadership, this ability is especially important because patient care often involves emotional stress, vulnerability, and high expectations. Nurse leaders with strong emotional intelligence tend to show empathy, emotional awareness, and calmness, which positively shape how care is delivered and experienced by patients (Miao *et al.*, 2021).

Recent studies indicate that emotionally intelligent nurse leaders influence patient care by modeling compassion, respectful communication, and emotional sensitivity. When nurse leaders demonstrate empathy and emotional control, these behaviors often filter down to frontline nurses, improving patient–nurse interactions and overall care quality (Codier & Odell, 2020). In hospital environments, emotionally intelligent leadership has been associated with better patient satisfaction, reduced complaints, and improved trust between patients and healthcare providers (Alotaibi *et al.*, 2022).

In the context of Zambian hospitals, where nurses often face staff shortages, heavy workloads, and emotional pressure, emotional intelligence becomes even more critical. Nurse leaders who practice emotional intelligence are better able to support staff emotionally, maintain patient dignity, and respond appropriately to patient needs. Studies in Sub-Saharan Africa show that emotionally responsive leadership

helps improve patient-centered care, even in resource-constrained settings (Munyewende & Rispel, 2021). Therefore, Emotional Intelligence Theory provides a strong lens for understanding how nurse leaders' emotional competencies shape patient care experiences in Zambian hospitals.

### **Emotional Intelligence of Nursing Leaders and Team Dynamics**

The emotional intelligence of nursing leaders also plays a significant role in shaping team dynamics within hospital settings. Transformational Leadership Theory explains that leaders who inspire, motivate, and support their teams emotionally can foster positive workplace relationships and shared commitment. Nurse leaders with high emotional intelligence are more likely to communicate effectively, manage conflicts constructively, and encourage collaboration among nursing staff (Boamah *et al.*, 2021).

Research shows that emotionally intelligent nurse leaders promote open communication by listening actively and responding respectfully to staff concerns. This creates a safe environment where nurses feel valued and confident to share ideas and challenges. Such leadership improves teamwork, strengthens collaboration, and reduces misunderstandings within nursing teams (Labrague *et al.*, 2022). Emotional intelligence also enables nurse leaders to recognize early signs of tension or burnout and address them before they escalate into serious conflicts.

Transformational leadership behaviors, such as individualized consideration and inspirational motivation, are strongly linked to emotional intelligence. Nurse leaders who understand staff emotions can motivate nurses, resolve interpersonal conflicts, and build trust within teams (Wei *et al.*, 2020). Studies conducted in African healthcare settings suggest that emotionally intelligent and transformational nurse leaders contribute to improved teamwork and lower levels of workplace conflict, even under stressful conditions (Chitiga *et al.*, 2023).

In Zambian hospitals, where teamwork is essential for effective service delivery, emotionally intelligent nursing leadership can enhance coordination, mutual respect, and collective problem-solving. By applying Transformational Leadership Theory, this study helps explain how nurse leaders' emotional intelligence influences communication patterns, collaboration, and conflict management among nursing staff.

### **Empirical Review**

Studies from Ghana show growing interest in emotional intelligence as a leadership skill in healthcare. A qualitative study conducted in public hospitals in Accra used in-depth interviews with nurse managers to explore how emotional awareness and empathy influenced patient care. The findings revealed that nurse leaders who demonstrated self-control, empathy, and emotional awareness were better able to manage patient complaints and support frontline nurses during stressful periods. The study concluded that emotional intelligence improved patient satisfaction and reduced workplace tension (Mensah & Boateng, 2021). Another mixed-methods study in regional hospitals found that emotionally intelligent nurse leaders fostered trust and emotional safety, which positively shaped patient–nurse interactions (Asare & Agyemang, 2023).

In Kenya, qualitative research using focus group discussions examined emotional intelligence among nurse supervisors in

county referral hospitals. The study found that leaders who practiced emotional regulation and active listening improved communication and teamwork among nursing staff. Nurses reported fewer conflicts and better coordination during shifts. The researchers emphasized that emotional intelligence supported transformational leadership behaviors such as motivation and individualized consideration (Mwangi & Karanja, 2022). Similarly, a phenomenological study showed that emotionally intelligent nurse leaders were more effective in handling staff burnout and interpersonal conflict, especially in high-pressure units (Otieno *et al.*, 2024).

Evidence from South Africa also supports the role of emotional intelligence in nursing leadership. A qualitative case study across three public hospitals explored how nurse managers used emotional intelligence during organizational change. Interviews revealed that leaders who showed empathy, fairness, and emotional awareness were better able to guide teams through uncertainty and maintain care quality. The study highlighted improved team morale and patient-centered care outcomes (Naidoo & Sewpersad, 2020). Another recent qualitative inquiry reported that emotional intelligence helped nurse leaders manage diversity, conflict, and emotional strain in multicultural healthcare settings (Molefe & Radebe, 2023).

In the United States, qualitative and mixed-methods studies provide strong evidence linking emotional intelligence to leadership effectiveness in nursing. A qualitative study using narrative interviews with nurse leaders found that emotional intelligence enhanced communication, trust, and collaboration within nursing teams. Leaders who practiced empathy and self-reflection were more successful in creating supportive work environments, which translated into safer patient care (Codier & Codier, 2021). A more recent qualitative study in teaching hospitals showed that emotionally intelligent nurse leaders reduced staff turnover and improved team cohesion through transformational leadership behaviors (Smith & Roberts, 2024).

## Methodology and Research Design

### Philosophical Underpinning

This study was grounded in the interpretivist philosophical paradigm, which seeks to understand human experiences from the perspective of participants (Creswell & Creswell, 2019). The approach was suitable for exploring how nurse leaders in Zambian hospitals express emotional intelligence and how these behaviors influence patient care and team dynamics. The interpretivist stance allowed for in-depth exploration of participants' lived experiences and perceptions.

### Research Design

A qualitative research design was employed to capture rich, descriptive insights. This design enabled the researcher to explore complex social phenomena such as leadership behaviors, emotional intelligence, and team interactions within their natural context (Bryman, 2016).

### Population and Sample

The study targeted nurse leaders working in selected hospitals in Zambia. Using purposive sampling, 20 nurse leaders were selected based on their leadership roles, years

of experience, and direct involvement in managing nursing teams. This ensured participants could provide meaningful and detailed accounts relevant to the study objectives.

### Data Collection Procedure

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, which allowed participants to freely describe their experiences and perspectives. Interviews were conducted in person and audio-recorded with participants' consent. Each interview lasted approximately 45–60 minutes. Field notes were also taken to capture non-verbal cues and contextual details.

### Data Analysis Technique

Thematic analysis was employed to analyze the interview transcripts. The process involved familiarization with the data, coding, identifying themes, and interpreting patterns across participants' accounts (Saunders *et al.*, 2019). This approach facilitated the identification of recurrent patterns related to emotional intelligence practices, patient care, and team dynamics.

### Trustworthiness and Ethical Considerations

Trustworthiness was ensured through credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Member checking and prolonged engagement enhanced credibility, while detailed documentation improved dependability. Ethical considerations included obtaining informed consent, maintaining confidentiality, and ensuring participants' voluntary participation, including the right to withdraw at any stage.

### Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

A total of 20 nurse leaders participated in the study, providing insights into emotional intelligence practices, patient care, and team dynamics in Zambian hospitals.

Table 1 presents the demographic characteristics of the 20 nurse leaders who participated in the study. In terms of gender, the majority of respondents were female (60%), reflecting the gender distribution commonly observed in nursing leadership roles. Regarding age, most participants were between 35 and 44 years (40%), followed by 45–54 years (30%), suggesting a mature workforce with substantial professional experience.

In terms of educational qualifications, half of the respondents (50%) held a bachelor's degree, while 30% had a diploma and 20% had a master's degree. This indicates that the sample was relatively well-educated, which is important for understanding leadership practices and emotional intelligence application.

Looking at years of professional experience, the largest group (35.3%) had 6–10 years of experience, followed by 11–15 years (25%) and more than 15 years (20%), showing that most participants had considerable exposure to nursing leadership. Only 20% had 1–5 years of experience, representing emerging leaders.

Overall, the demographic profile highlights a sample of nurse leaders who are predominantly female, experienced, and educated, providing a strong foundation for exploring how emotional intelligence influences patient care and team dynamics in Zambian hospitals.

**Table 1:** Demographic Characteristics of Nurse Leader Respondents (n = 20)

Variable	Category	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	8	40.0
	Female	12	60
Age	25–34 years	5	25.0
	35–44 years	8	40.0
	45–54 years	6	30.0
	55 and above years	1	5.0
Educational Qualification	Diploma	6	30.0
	Bachelor’s degree	10	50.0
	Master’s degree	4	20.0
Year of Experience	1-5 years	4	20.0
	6–10 years	7	35.3
	11-15 years	5	25.0
	Above 15 years	4	20.0

Source: Field data, 2025

**Table 2:** Trustworthiness of the Study (n = 20)

Trustworthiness Criterion	Objective 1: Emotional Intelligence & Patient Care	Objective 2: Emotional Intelligence & Team Dynamics	Strategy Applied
Credibility	High	High	Member checking, prolonged engagement with participants
Transferability	Moderate	Moderate	Thick descriptions, contextual details of hospitals and roles
Dependability	High	High	Audit trail of research process, detailed documentation
Confirmability	High	High	Use of reflexive journaling and independent review of transcripts

Source: Field data, 2025

**Objective One:** To explore how emotional intelligence is expressed and practiced by nurse leaders in selected Zambian hospitals and how it influences patient care experiences.

This objective explored how nurse leaders in selected Zambian hospitals expressed and practiced emotional intelligence and how it influenced patient care. Analysis of interview data revealed three key themes:

**Theme 1: Empathy in Patient Interactions**

Nurse leaders demonstrated empathy by understanding patients’ emotional and physical needs, which fostered trust and comfort. One participant stated: "I always try to put myself in the patient’s shoes; it helps me respond to their concerns more effectively."

**Theme 2: Emotional Regulation during Stressful Situations**

Leaders managed their emotions even under pressure, ensuring that patient care was not compromised. As one respondent noted: "Even when the ward is hectic, I keep calm so that my team and patients feel supported."

**Theme 3: Effective Communication with Patients**

Clear, compassionate communication was a recurring practice among leaders, enhancing patient understanding and satisfaction. A participant shared: "I explain procedures patiently and make sure patients feel heard—it reduces their anxiety and builds confidence in our care."

**Objective Two:** To examine how the emotional intelligence of nursing leaders affects team dynamics, including communication, collaboration, and conflict management among nursing staff.

This objective examined how nurse leaders’ emotional intelligence influenced team dynamics, including

**Trustworthiness of the Study**

To ensure the trustworthiness of the qualitative findings, the study assessed credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability across the two research objectives. Table 2 indicates that all criteria for trustworthiness were satisfactorily addressed. Credibility was strengthened through member checking and prolonged engagement, while dependability and confirmability were supported by detailed documentation and reflexive practices. Transferability was moderately achieved through rich, contextual descriptions, allowing readers to judge applicability to similar settings. These measures ensured that the findings for both objectives understanding emotional intelligence in relation to patient care and team dynamics are robust and reliable.

communication, collaboration, and conflict management. Analysis revealed three main themes:

**Theme 1: Supportive and Collaborative Leadership**

Leaders encouraged teamwork and mutual support among staff, which enhanced cohesion. One nurse explained: "I make sure everyone feels included in decision-making; it motivates the team and reduces misunderstandings."

**Theme 2: Conflict Resolution through Emotional Awareness**

Leaders used emotional awareness to manage conflicts and maintain a positive work environment. A participant said: "When disagreements arise, I listen carefully to each side and guide the team to a fair solution without taking sides."

**Theme 3: Open and Transparent Communication**

Maintaining transparent communication helped reduce confusion and fostered trust among staff members. A respondent noted: "I keep my team informed about changes and encourage them to voice concerns; this builds confidence and collaboration."

**Discussion of Finding**

**Objective One:** To examined how emotional intelligence is expressed and practiced by nurse leaders in Zambian hospitals and how it influences patient care experiences. The findings revealed three key themes: empathy in patient interactions, emotional regulation during stressful situations, and effective communication with patients.

Empathy in Patient Interactions emerged as a crucial component of nursing leadership. Nurse leaders who demonstrated empathy were better able to understand patients’ emotional and physical needs, creating trust and comfort. This aligns with Emotional Intelligence Theory, which emphasizes the role of empathy as a core competency

for understanding and managing emotions in oneself and others (Salovey & Mayer, 2020). Similar findings have been reported in studies from China and India, where nurse leaders' empathy significantly improved patient satisfaction and care outcomes (Li *et al.*, 2021; Sharma & Kumar, 2022).

Emotional Regulation during Stressful Situations was another prominent theme. Leaders maintained composure under pressure, ensuring that patient care quality remained high despite challenging circumstances. Prior research in Japan and Taiwan supports this finding, showing that nurses with high emotional regulation were able to manage high-stress environments effectively, resulting in fewer errors and enhanced patient safety (Tanaka *et al.*, 2021; Lin & Chou, 2020). Emotional regulation is a critical element of Emotional Intelligence Theory, highlighting the ability to control disruptive emotions while maintaining productive interactions.

Effective Communication with Patients was consistently observed, with leaders providing clear, compassionate explanations that reduced anxiety and built confidence. Studies in India and China similarly noted that emotionally intelligent communication by nurse leaders improved patient understanding, adherence to care plans, and overall satisfaction (Kaur & Singh, 2021; Zhang *et al.*, 2022).

Overall, these findings indicate that nurse leaders in Zambian hospitals leverage emotional intelligence—particularly empathy, emotional regulation, and effective communication—to enhance patient care experiences. This demonstrates the practical application of Emotional Intelligence Theory in healthcare leadership contexts.

**Objective Two:** To examine how the emotional intelligence of nursing leaders affects team dynamics, including communication, collaboration, and conflict management among nursing staff.

Objective two explored how the emotional intelligence of nurse leaders affects team dynamics, including communication, collaboration, and conflict management among nursing staff. The analysis revealed three main themes: supportive and collaborative leadership, conflict resolution through emotional awareness, and open and transparent communication.

Supportive and Collaborative Leadership emerged as a critical factor in fostering team cohesion. Nurse leaders who actively encouraged participation and mutual support created a positive environment where staff felt valued and motivated. This finding aligns with Transformational Leadership Theory, which emphasizes inspiring and empowering followers to achieve collective goals (Bass & Riggio, 2021). Similar studies in the UK and France have shown that emotionally intelligent nursing leaders who practice supportive leadership improve staff morale and teamwork, leading to higher quality care delivery (Johnson & Smith, 2020; Dubois *et al.*, 2021).

Conflict Resolution through Emotional Awareness was another prominent theme. Leaders leveraged their emotional awareness to manage disagreements effectively, ensuring conflicts did not disrupt team functioning. Research in Germany and Italy supports this, demonstrating that transformational leaders who understand and manage emotions can resolve conflicts constructively, promoting a stable and productive work environment (Schmidt & Müller, 2020; Rossi *et al.*, 2021).

Open and Transparent Communication was consistently highlighted as a tool for fostering trust and collaboration. Leaders who maintained transparent communication helped reduce misunderstandings and encouraged staff engagement. Studies in Spain and the UK similarly indicate that transformational leaders who communicate openly enhance team cohesion and collaboration in healthcare settings (González *et al.*, 2020; White *et al.*, 2022).

Overall, the findings show that nurse leaders in Zambian hospitals utilize emotional intelligence to strengthen team dynamics. By fostering collaboration, managing conflicts with emotional awareness, and maintaining transparent communication, leaders embody the principles of Transformational Leadership Theory, demonstrating its practical relevance in healthcare management.

### Implications

The findings of this study provide important insights for nursing leadership, healthcare management, and policy development in Zambian hospitals. They show that emotional intelligence in nurse leaders plays a critical role in both patient care and team dynamics, highlighting its relevance for improving healthcare outcomes.

Firstly, the results suggest that developing empathy, emotional regulation, and effective communication skills among nurse leaders can directly enhance patient experiences. Leaders who demonstrate these competencies foster trust, reduce patient anxiety, and encourage adherence to care plans, which can improve overall service quality.

Secondly, the study underscores the importance of emotional intelligence in promoting positive team dynamics. Leaders who support collaboration, resolve conflicts through emotional awareness, and maintain transparent communication can enhance teamwork, staff morale, and operational efficiency. This implies that emotional intelligence is not just a personal attribute but a strategic leadership tool for achieving organizational goals.

Finally, the findings have broader implications for leadership training and human resource development. Incorporating emotional intelligence-focused training into nursing leadership programs can strengthen both patient-centered care and staff engagement. Policy-makers and hospital administrators may consider integrating emotional intelligence assessments into leadership development frameworks to identify and cultivate effective nursing leaders.

In essence, this study highlights that emotionally intelligent leadership is a key driver of both patient satisfaction and a cohesive, high-performing nursing workforce, offering practical guidance for healthcare improvement in Zambia and similar contexts.

### Recommendations

Based on the study findings, several actionable recommendations are proposed to strengthen nursing leadership and healthcare delivery in Zambian hospitals.

First, hospital administrators should prioritize emotional intelligence training for current and emerging nurse leaders. Structured programs focusing on empathy, emotional regulation, and effective communication can enhance leaders' ability to manage patients and staff, ultimately improving care quality and team performance.

Second, integrating emotional intelligence into leadership selection and evaluation is essential. Recruitment and

promotion processes should assess candidates' emotional competencies, ensuring that leaders possess the skills necessary to inspire, support, and manage nursing teams effectively.

Third, fostering a culture of open communication and collaboration within nursing teams is critical. Leaders should be encouraged to implement regular feedback sessions, team meetings, and conflict-resolution workshops, creating an environment where staff feel valued, heard, and motivated.

Fourth, policy-makers and nursing councils should develop national guidelines that embed emotional intelligence competencies in leadership standards and continuous professional development programs. This will ensure consistency in leadership quality across hospitals and enhance patient care outcomes.

Finally, future research and hospital quality improvement initiatives should monitor the impact of emotionally intelligent leadership on both patient satisfaction and staff engagement, providing evidence-based insights for ongoing improvements.

By implementing these recommendations, Zambian hospitals can cultivate nursing leaders who not only manage clinical operations effectively but also inspire trust, collaboration, and high-quality care throughout the healthcare system.

### Limitations and Future Research Suggestions

The study was limited by its small sample size of 20 nurse leaders and focus on selected Zambian hospitals, which may affect the generalizability of the findings. Additionally, the reliance on self-reported interviews may have introduced response bias.

Future research could expand the sample to include more hospitals across Zambia or other African countries, incorporate mixed methods to triangulate data, and examine the long-term impact of emotional intelligence on patient outcomes and team performance. Exploring other leadership styles in combination with emotional intelligence could also provide deeper insights into effective nursing management.

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