Background and objective: The invisibility of pathogens under normal circumstances is a particular challenge for healthcare staff seeking to prevent and control infection in clinical areas. Within this context, very little is known about the extent to which these staff use the mind's eye to visualise pathogens and their relationship to healthcare associated infections. This poster reports on an initial study which addressed this knowledge deficit by exploring how healthcare workers envisage pathogens in the hospital context.

Methods: Ten hospital-based healthcare workers and two patient representatives participated in an in-depth workshop combining risk identification, making activities and in-depth interviews. This methodology was informed by Sullivan’s Dimensions of Visualisation framework relating to data, text, ideas and objects. A descriptive cross case analysis approach was used to summarise and synthesise the data.

Findings: Participants described their respective roles and routines and indicated perceived loci and foci for pathogens and associated risks. Few of the participants actively visualised pathogens in their mind’s eye during clinical practice. However, through the making activity, the study elicited mental images of pathogens from all participants and this yielded detailed insights into imagined pathogen characteristics. Conceptions appeared to be influenced primarily by microbiology and infection control campaigns.

Conclusion: Our adaptation of Sullivan’s Dimensions of Visualisation framework proved useful in structuring this initial enquiry and merits wider application and evaluation by qualitative health researchers. Moreover, with increasing international interest in the role of mental models in influencing clinical IPC practice, further research on the nature and impact of visual representations is merited.


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