The Meaning and Characteristics of Proactive Health Care Service Among Specialists: Case Study of Specialists in the Northeasternregion of Thailand

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Abstract

Proactive healthcare is expanding in Thailand's tertiary care system, yet little is known about how such practice shapes physicians' work experiences. This qualitative intrinsic case study examined how specialist physicians' engagement in proactive care influences their job characteristics and subjective experience of meaningful work. Five specialists in various medical fields were purposively selected, based on their experience working in tertiary hospitals, having at least two year of proactive care experience across multiple settings, and engaging in multidisciplinary or system-level collaboration. Semi-structured interviews were conducted. Inductive thematic analysis, guided by Hackman and Oldham's Job Characteristics Model, was employed to analyze the data, and trustworthiness was confirmed via methodological triangulation and member checking. Findings revealed that proactive practice significantly enhanced three core job dimensions-skill variety, task identity, and task significance-by demanding responsibilities that extend beyond conventional hospital-based clinical duties. Physicians reported developing broader psychosocial competencies, including communication, coordination, network development, and interprofessional collaboration. The experience of meaningful work clearly emerged across four distinct dimensions: developing the professional self, fostering unity with colleagues, serving others, and expressing one's full professional potential. Following patient journeys across care settings allowed physicians to address barriers to care, improve access for underserved groups, and enhance continuity of care. The study suggests that proactive healthcare fostered a holistic work environment that strengthened patient outcomes and physicians' sense of purpose. These findings highlight the critical role of organizational psychology principles, specifically job design, organizational conditions, and interprofessional collaboration, in promoting sustained meaningful engagement within Thailand's evolving healthcare landscape.

Keywords: meaningful work, job characteristics, proactive healthcare

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Introduction

According to Thailand's Health Status Report over the past 10 years, covering the period from 2011 to 2020 (HISO, 2020) and published by the Bureau of Strategy and Planning, there have been significant changes in population health across five key categories: communicable diseases, non-communicable diseases, health-related behaviors, accidents, and mental and social health. These trends have shown a continuous increase. At the same time, the Thailand Development Research Institute projected that public health expenditures could rise to between 0.48 and 0.63 trillion baht over the next 15 years, driven by increasing disease prevalence and rising healthcare costs.

Historically, Thailand's health system has focused primarily on curative care, emphasizing reactive treatment at health facilities. Therefore, there is a critical need to shift toward proactive health approaches—emphasizing health promotion and disease prevention—throughout all levels of care: primary, secondary, and tertiary. The goal is to build a seamless health network that integrates health promotion, treatment, prevention, and rehabilitation.

Proactive Health Care Services include out-of-facility treatment, continuity of care, health promotion, and disease prevention. These services aim to empower individuals to control and improve their own health, achieving complete physical, mental, and social well-being (National Health Commission Office, 2022). Additionally, they involve controlling the causes and risk factors of diseases to either prevent onset or mitigate severe outcomes. Treatment outside traditional facilities is also part of this proactive approach.

Research shows that the Northeastern region of Thailand has the highest poverty rates. Although the national ratio of healthcare professionals—doctors, dentists, pharmacists, and nurses—has improved overall, disparities remain. Medical specialists and high-cost equipment are concentrated in large hospitals, while health zones in the Northeast have the fewest resources. Chronic non-communicable diseases (NCDs), cancers, and infections are the main health issues in this region, with many patients requiring long-term care (Sittikan & Jongudomkarn, 2020).

These findings indicate that people in the Northeast face significant barriers to accessing primary health care, along with persistent inequities in health and access to basic public health services. Consequently, there is a growing need to strengthen proactive health services, especially Primary Health Care (PHC), which has long been the foundation of Thailand's health system.

Pilot programs in the Northeast, such as the Ban Phai Project (Khon Kaen Province) and the Non Thai Project (Nakhon Ratchasima Province), serve as examples of successful proactive health models. These initiatives demonstrate how public health can be driven by community participation with government support.

Proactive work is a core part of the Primary Health Care system. When healthcare professionals recognize its importance, it enables improved access to health services. Studies of pilot programs developing specialist physicians in health promotion and disease prevention for integrated care networks found that the Northeast had more proactive specialists than other regions. These specialists often work across primary and secondary care units, improving access to medical professionals.

Specialist physicians engaging in proactive care design processes for holistic care, seamless care, and continuity of care, spanning from tertiary to primary levels. Their work involves interdisciplinary collaboration with other health professionals to ensure consistent patient management across the care continuum.

This mode of proactive service aligns with Hackman and Oldham's Job Characteristics Model (JCM) (1976), which identifies skill variety, task identity, and task significance as key factors influencing meaningful work experiences.

Thus, this study aims to explore how specialist physicians attribute meaning to their proactive roles, including the job characteristics involved. These proactive roles are intentionally designed and involve diverse skillsets beyond clinical expertise. They represent a structured working process in collaboration with other professionals within secondary and primary care. Furthermore, the study explores system-level factors that contribute to meaningful engagement in proactive services, and how these models foster new work processes that integrate tertiary, secondary, and primary care—ultimately creating meaningful work experiences for healthcare providers and teams serving the population.

Literature Review

Rosso et al. (2010) defined key dimensions of meaningful work based on individual experiences. Their framework includes the following components:

1. Positive Meaning in Work – This dimension reflects a psychological sense of meaning in one's job, aligning with the concepts proposed by Hackman and Oldham (1976) and Rosso et al. (2010). It refers to an individual's perception of their work as important and meaningful, based on personal experiences.
2. Meaning Making Through Work – This refers to how work contributes to an individual's broader sense of life meaning, enhancing self-awareness, contextual understanding, and personal development through work.
3. Greater Good Motivation – This dimension captures the desire to positively impact something beyond oneself. Individuals believe their work has the most value when it benefits others or contributes to the greater good.

Lips-Wiersma and Morris (2009) proposed a more comprehensive framework for meaningful work, outlining four key dimensions:

1. Developing and Becoming Self – This includes:
   - Moral Development: Practicing ethical principles and doing what is right fosters meaningful experiences.
   - Personal Development: Continuous learning and taking on new challenges support individual growth.
   - Being True to Self: Maintaining one's authenticity and expressing individuality within the organization.
2. Serving Others – This dimension involves:
   - Making a Difference: Positively impacting others within or outside the organization.
   - Meeting the Needs of Humanity: Finding purpose by addressing human needs and connecting personal efforts to larger causes.
3. Unity with Others – Meaningful work emerges from:
   - Sharing Values: Working with others who share similar values and expressing those values collectively.
   - Belonging: Feeling a sense of mutual care and interdependence.

   - Working Together: Collaborating as part of a supportive community.
4. Expressing Full Potential – This involves:
   - Creating: Generating new ideas or outputs.
   - Achieving: Gaining fulfillment through learning and accomplishments.
   - Influencing: Making an impact by shaping perspectives or circumstances.

According to the study of job characteristics by Hackman and Oldham, the concept of job design can significantly influence organizational outcomes. First proposed by Hackman and Oldham (1976), job characteristics are defined as elements of work design that promote employee motivation. This includes designing jobs that are holistic, appropriately challenging, and meaningful—allowing employees to see the importance of their roles in driving organizational success. Furthermore, jobs should provide autonomy, enabling employees to determine how and when tasks are performed, as well as offer feedback regarding the effectiveness and quality of their work.

The Job Characteristics Model (JCM) theorizes that five core job dimensions—skill variety, task identity, task significance, autonomy, and feedback—positively influence individual and organizational performance. These five dimensions are said to stimulate three critical psychological states:

1. Experienced meaningfulness of the work
2. Experienced responsibility for outcomes of the work
3. Knowledge of the actual results of the work activities

These psychological states are central to the model, which builds upon earlier work by Hackman and Lawler (1971). The link between job dimensions and psychological states, as well as between these states and work outcomes, becomes apparent when individuals possess a strong growth need strength—the desire to learn, develop, and take on challenging work.

Methodology

This study was driven by the researcher's interest in exploring how specialist physicians perceive meaningful work in the context of proactive healthcare at both the secondary and primary care levels. The study also seeks to understand individual-level factors that contribute to the experience of meaningful work.

A qualitative case study approach was employed, focusing on specialist physicians working in tertiary care hospitals in the Northeastern region of Thailand. The conceptual framework for meaningful work in this study was based on the model proposed by Lips-Wiersma and Morris (2009), which outlines four core dimensions of meaningful work:

1. Developing and Becoming Self
2. Serving Others
3. Unity with Others
4. Expressing Full Potential

In addition, the study incorporates the Job Characteristics Model (JCM) to examine how specific job features influence the sense of meaningful work. Based on these conceptual frameworks, the researcher adopted a qualitative research paradigm to gain deep insights into the participants' lived experiences.

Key Informants

Key informants were selected using purposive sampling, focusing on specialist physicians who are actively engaged in proactive health services. The sample was determined with reference to expert recommendations, particularly from the Directors of Clinical Medical Education Centers in various provinces in Northeastern Thailand.

A total of five specialist physicians from different fields were selected as key informants. All were participants in the Model Specialist Development Project, which promotes preventive healthcare and the development of seamless care networks. This sampling strategy follows the approach recommended by Creswell (2002) for qualitative research involving small, focused samples.

Secondary Informants

For the secondary informants, purposive sampling was also used. This group consisted of interdisciplinary healthcare professionals who work collaboratively with specialist physicians engaged in proactive healthcare. In this study, the perspectives of the specialist physicians were primarily utilized.

Research Instruments

The Researcher

The researcher acted as the interviewer, responsible for conducting the interviews, audio recording the sessions, taking detailed notes, and simultaneously collecting, analyzing, and refining the data.

Interview Questions

In-depth interviews were conducted to explore perceptions of meaningful work and the job characteristics that contribute to meaningful work. The interviews followed a semi-structured format to allow flexibility while covering key topics.

Audio Recorder

The audio recorder was used as a supplementary tool during interviews to capture information from participants. It facilitated the accurate recording of detailed data, allowing the researcher to review the information later and ensure precise and clear data summarization.

Notebook

The researcher used a notebook to record detailed information during each interview session. This helped ensure the completeness of the data, aided in organizing thoughts for future planning, and assisted in periodic data summarization.

Data Analysis

The researcher analyzed the interview data using Thematic Analysis following the steps outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006).

Results

For specialist physicians, meaningful proactive work is defined as work that benefits the community, fosters collective well-being, and contributes to the broader national preventive health system—ultimately leading to a sense of fulfillment and happiness among healthcare providers themselves based on the analysis of job characteristics and work meaningfulness, the following conclusions were drawn.

Job Characteristics Model

The qualitative findings show that specialist physicians' proactive work is a "re-designed" form of practice that shifts from a reactive hospital-based model to a proactive, network-based system of care. It expands job characteristics beyond clinical duties to include coordination, communication, and system-level collaboration, covering the full continuum of care from prevention to palliative services. Physicians also play a key role in designing and improving service models through intrinsic motivation and experience-based innovation within supportive organizations. This approach enhances multidisciplinary teamwork, strengthens professional confidence and role clarity, and increases perceived value through patient and family satisfaction. Overall, proactive work delivers more holistic care while reducing burdens on patients, families, and the healthcare system.

Skill Variety

Physicians reported having opportunities to perform a variety of tasks, especially in the early stages of their careers when they are often assigned a wide range of responsibilities. Many also create new roles or activities that contribute to holistic care. For example, physicians who are interested in patient and family healing may initiate therapeutic activities to better understand and support patients and their families. In proactive work, physicians must utilize a broad set of skills. Among these, communication skills are considered the most critical, as they must engage with both interprofessional teams and patients. Communication includes coaching, positive motivation, value-sharing, vision-sharing, and persuasion—particularly with the team—to build a proactive service network. Furthermore, communication related to grief counseling for patients and families is essential. Active listening is also emphasized, especially in proactive work, where deeper listening can help uncover problems and foster creative, context-specific solutions.

Task Identity

Proactive work allows physicians to see the patient's journey from beginning to end, offering a sense of ownership and connection with the entire care process. Many physicians start gaining this perspective from their time as medical students, continuing into their professional careers. Visiting bedridden patients at home helps them understand the full picture of patients' real lives and well-being beyond the hospital walls. This comprehensive perspective, often referred to as the "patient journey," is seen as essential in proactive care.

Task Significance

Proactive care is not only seen as beneficial to patients but also as vital to the hospital system. Designing preventive care processes and early interventions can positively impact patient outcomes and support healthcare staff in the long run. The importance of this work extends

beyond individual doctors and in-hospital treatment to the entire healthcare system and its sustainability.

Meaningful Work

The findings show that proactive work enhances physicians' sense of meaningful work by creating positive impacts for patients, communities, and the health system, such as improving access, reducing costs, and lowering hospital burden. Through multidisciplinary collaboration and network-based care, physicians experience strong professional fulfillment, pride, and motivation beyond financial rewards. This work strengthens their sense of purpose as "true physicians" by enabling them to help others, witness patient improvement, and contribute to sustainable, high-quality healthcare delivery. The findings show that proactive work enhances physicians' sense of meaningful work by creating positive impacts for patients, communities, and the health system, such as improving access, reducing costs, and lowering hospital burden. Through multidisciplinary collaboration and network-based care, physicians experience strong professional fulfillment, pride, and motivation beyond financial rewards. This work strengthens their sense of purpose as "true physicians" by enabling them to help others, witness patient improvement, and contribute to sustainable, high-quality healthcare delivery.

Developing and Becoming Self

Physicians engaged in proactive care often feel personally connected to their work in building networks and systems. This prompts self-reflection on how they can go beyond routine clinical practice. Working in proactive care allows them to fully apply their knowledge, fosters broader learning, and leads to personal growth. Many express a sense of pride, fulfillment, and belief in the value of their work, knowing it benefits the wider community.

Serving Others

Proactive work enables physicians to assist patients in remote or financially disadvantaged areas. They actively seek to reduce patient burdens, such as transportation costs, through innovations like telemedicine and direct visits to community hospitals. These strategies minimize unnecessary patient travel and enhance accessibility to care, especially for those who cannot afford it.

Unity With Others

In practice, physicians cannot carry out proactive work alone. Interprofessional collaboration is essential. Teamwork among doctors, nurses, and other healthcare professionals, especially during home visits, helps address diverse challenges in different contexts. A shared attitude and commitment toward proactive care among team members is key to success. Equally important is support from hospital administrators, who play a critical role in enabling physicians to collaborate with district hospitals and local healthcare units.

Expressing Full Potential

Proactive work allows specialist physicians to fully realize their potential by creating impactful and meaningful projects. Examples include the development of province-wide care networks, effective referral systems, and scalable models of proactive care that inspire other specialists to join in. These physicians become role models, driving innovation and motivating younger

generations. The ability to use their full capabilities to serve patients brings great satisfaction and a strong sense of purpose to their professional lives.

Conclusion

Meaningful proactive work for specialist physicians involves community-oriented efforts that enhance population well-being and support national health prevention systems, while also fostering greater professional fulfillment. It strengthens physicians' sense of connection to the purpose of care and is often shaped by early training and rural service experiences. This work addresses patient-centered concerns such as cost, access, and travel burden, while maintaining care quality even in remote settings. It requires strong collaboration across healthcare levels, promoting teamwork, shared problem-solving, and the development of service networks. Compared to routine clinical work, proactive work is more diverse and complex, requiring skills in communication, motivation, and coaching. Importantly, it enables physicians to engage with the full continuum of care, leading to more holistic, continuous services and greater impact on both patient outcomes and the sustainability of healthcare systems.

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