Meeting With Care: The Transformations of Meeting Practices in Post COVID-19 Hospital Management in Belgium

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In today’s organisations, meetings are ubiquitous. In general, meetings are defined by their instrumental or strategic functions, setting aside the relational purposes. However, meetings as rituals, act as a reflection of organisational and managerial practices. This study explores meeting practices in hospitals to investigate hospital management and to question whether an ethic of care approach emerges from the changes administered during and after the COVID-19 crisis. This qualitative study is based on 153 in-depth interviews, collected between September – December 2022, with a diverse panel of hospital managers and staff in hospitals across the French-speaking regions of Belgium. Meetings are a necessary tool for the good functioning of hospitals and hold both instrumental and relational purposes according to hospital staff. However, during the COVID-19 crisis, the sanitary context and regulations meant that the occurrence, and the form of meetings changed. The sudden changes made the relational aspects that were removed or transformed visible. Since the crisis, hospitals have adopted and integrated online meetings, raising a discussion around the tension between the heightened efficiency these allow, and the time and space removed from relational elements. Meetings are spaces for social relations and attention to staff’s needs. They’re spaces of and for ‘care’ in organisations. Presence appears to be an important dimension of care – caring for each other and for the work in organizations. The crisis has made relational practices embedded in meetings visible and shown their importance for the hospital as an organization.