

Perianesthesia Nursing—Beyond the Critical Care Skills

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Provision of patient care within the perianesthesia specialty is demanding in nature. Although a nurse may be well equipped with the assessment, planning, and critical thinking skills required for these fast-paced areas, there are other competencies to be developed. These include skills in mentorship, communication, crisis management, and competency as an ambassador of patient safety. Barriers to developing these skills may include a high patient acuity and turnover; a sense of isolation from other departments, and strong hierarchical structures. However, there are resources and strategies that nurses can leverage to facilitate development of these less-technical, “softer” skills. In this article, the author reviews some of the unique demands commonly seen within the perianesthesia specialty. Methods to address these challenges are shared to facilitate an enjoyable career in this dynamic environment.

Keywords: perianesthesia, competencies, PACU, critical thinking.

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OBJECTIVES—AFTER READING THIS ARTICLE, the participant should be able to:

1. Describe the skills around communication, mentorship and crisis management within perianesthesia nursing.
2. Identify two communication tools that support patient safety.
3. Describe methods that address interpersonal conflict.

Nurses within the large umbrella of the perianesthesia specialty provide care to a wide range of patients. Whether the setting is a postanesthesia care unit (PACU), ambulatory care department, or dental surgery clinic, there are competencies that all perianesthesia nurses share. These include, but are not limited to, excellent assessment skills,

critical thinking, knowledge of pharmacology, and certification in basic or advanced cardiac life support. Perianesthesia nursing is much more than coordinating patient care and ensuring that comforts and hemodynamic stability are achieved. The perianesthesia nurse requires another set of competencies that may be thought of as a softer set of skills, but important nonetheless. These include communication skills, crisis management, mentorship, and acting as an ambassador for safety (Figure 1).

Working day after day in a department such as a PACU that was designed without exterior windows can create a sense of confinement and lead to isolation from other departments. There are times when it seems all efforts to transfer a stable patient to the next phase of care are met with resistance and numerous barriers. The nurse who consistently receives a cold reception from staff outside her unit can start to develop feelings of resentment. Although we cannot always shape the behavior of others, we can work to improve our own attitudes and the coping and communication skills that we apply in patient care.

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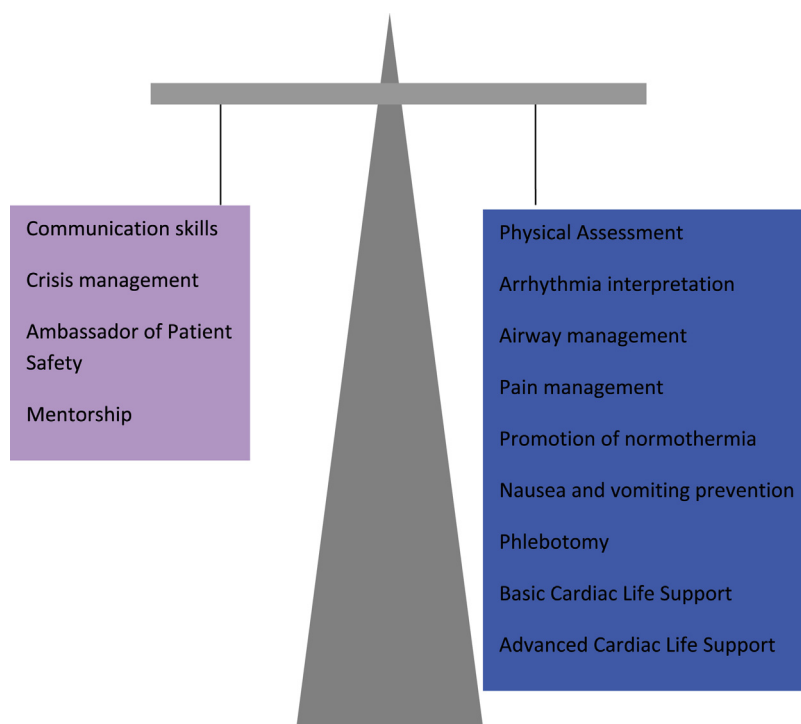


Figure 1. Balancing technical and nontechnical skills.

Communication Skills

Needless to say, good communication skills are a key competency for any nurse. Improving communication skills can enhance patient safety, as communication failures have been linked to adverse events that otherwise may have been prevented.¹ The perianesthesia nurse is often receiving and providing reports to a number of health care providers. By gathering a clear assessment from the patient, family, and staff, the perianesthesia nurse ensures that all vital information is clearly communicated across the continuum of care. For example, through use of effective communication skills, the perianesthesia nurse confirms that the consent the patient has provided is informed in nature and is not simply the patient's signature on yet another form. It is through discussion with the patient and family that the nurse can identify knowledge gaps and provide clarification and health teaching. Moreover, the nurse advocates for the patient by requesting the surgeon to provide additional information or answer questions as necessary.²

Communication skills support patient safety, particularly when providing a transfer of care report from the PACU to another department. The

transfer of care report may also be referred to as a transfer of accountability (TOA) report, as the accountability of the patient's care is being taken over by a new provider. The TOA report should be an interactive process between the perianesthesia nurse and the nurse assuming care of the patient. The College of Nurses of Ontario and the American Society of PeriAnesthesia Nurses recommend using a standardized process to complete the TOA report to ensure effective communication and information sharing occurs across the care continuum.^{3,4}

Another transition point where communication skills are of great importance is when preparing patients for home discharge. At this time, the patient and/or family must be provided information that is relevant and easily understood. For example, the clarity of health teaching provided must ensure that the patient and/or family understand the normal postoperative expectations, as well as situations that would require them to seek medical help.

It is well known that poor communication is a factor in 70% of adverse events.⁵ Communication failures during shift reports are a leading cause of

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