

Transferring Patient Care: Patterns of Synchronous Bidisciplinary Communication Between Physicians and Nurses During Handoffs in a Critical Care Unit

Alicia McMullan, MA, Avi Parush, PhD, Kathryn Momtaban, PhD, RN

Purpose: *The transfer of patient care from one health care worker to another involves communication in high-pressure contexts that are often vulnerable to error. This research project captured current practices for handoffs during the critical care stage of surgical recovery in a hospital setting. The objective was to characterize information flow during transfer and identify patterns of communication between nurses and physicians.*

Design and Methods: *Observations were used to document communication exchanges. The data were analyzed qualitatively according to the types of information exchanged and verbal behavior types.*

Findings: *Reporting and questions were the most common verbal behaviors, and retrospective medical information was the focus of information exchange. The communication was highly interactive when discussing patient status and future care plans. Nurses proactively asked questions to capture a large proportion of the information they needed.*

Conclusions: *Findings reflect positive and constructive patterns of communication during handoffs in the observed hospital unit.*

Keywords: *communication, handoffs, patient safety.*

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THE TRANSFER OF A PATIENT'S CARE from one health care worker to another or from one area of care to another involves communication in high-pressure contexts that are often vulnerable to error. Errors in information sharing among clinical staff during handoffs have been shown to lead to adverse health events.¹⁻⁴ Although there is a growing awareness of the need for high-quality

processes during this critical, yet susceptible point in the care system,^{4,6} the current literature does not conclusively identify where communication failures typically occur.⁷

According to O'Byrne et al,⁸ the patient handoff is one of the most important points in the health care process for the exchange of critical information.

Alicia McMullan, MA, Ottawa University, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada. Miss McMullan is currently a PhD candidate in experimental psychology in the School of Psychology at The University of Ottawa in Ontario, Canada; Avi Parush, PhD, Carleton University, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada. Dr Avi Parush is a professor of psychology in the Department of Psychology at Carleton University, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada and an adjunct professor in the School of Nursing at Queen's University in Ontario, Canada; and Kathryn Momtaban, PhD, RN, The Ottawa Hospital, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada. Dr Momtaban is currently the lead of nursing research at The Ottawa Hospital and an adjunct professor in the Department of Psychology at Carleton University in Ottawa, Ontario, Canada.

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Address correspondence to Alicia McMullan, The University of Ottawa, 55 Laurier Avenue East, Desmarais 6140, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada K1N6N5; e-mail address: allemcmullan@gmail.com.

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The moment a handoff to a different health care worker occurs, there is an implied risk of information loss. Moreover, with a transfer to a different hospital unit, there is an additional risk because of a new environment that may have different interactions and procedures.^{9,10} Therefore, although handoffs are a necessary component of patient care, they can increase susceptibility to medical error through poor transfer of information, differential authority, and diffused responsibility for patient care.¹⁰

The purpose of this research project was to capture current practices for handoffs during the critical care stage of recovery after surgery in a hospital setting. Specifically, the objective was to characterize information flow during transfer and identify patterns of communication between nurses and physicians. This was accomplished by documenting the verbal communications involved in transferring a patient from the operating room (OR) to the postanesthesia care unit (PACU).

The Significances of Communication During the Patient Care Handoff

The consequences of communication errors can be significant for both the patient and the health care worker. A recent study of postoperative care revealed that the patient outcome was directly related to communication and care coordination.¹¹ The search for missing information or clarification of treatment orders can lead to delays in care and/or adverse events (T. Foster-Hunt, unpublished master's thesis, 2009).¹⁰ The negative consequences of such gaps in communication have consequences for all involved as the workload and stress of the health care workers increase along with risks to the patient's quality of care. Poor communication concerning patient-relevant details during a handoff can also lead to inconsistencies in care, which have been identified as a threatening factor to patient safety.¹¹

To develop effective communication solutions in health care, several research studies (T. Foster-Hunt, unpublished master's thesis, 2009)¹¹⁻¹⁶ have investigated the communication modes used in health care settings and evaluated these in terms of their facilitation of performance during patient care. Depending on the environmental circumstances, different communication

approaches can provide different benefits and consequences to effective health care.

Synchronous Communication

Synchronous communication occurs when a hand-off is carried out in real time, most commonly in a face-to-face manner.^{11,12} In a study by Coiera and Tombs,¹³ synchronous communication was identified as the most preferred means of communication throughout the hospital under study, and this finding has been confirmed by subsequent research studies.¹⁴⁻¹⁶ There were several reasons listed and among them was the desire for the social facilitation of the face-to-face interactions, the ability to clarify and ask questions with immediate responses, and the ability to confirm the transfer of responsibility for the patient.¹⁵ In two recent studies of patient handoffs in the emergency department and during nursing shift reports, researchers found that face-to-face communications were the most frequent means of information exchange (T. Foster-Hunt, unpublished master's thesis, 2009).¹⁷ The communication events observed from nursing shift reports (T. Foster-Hunt, unpublished master's thesis, 2009) were highly interactive, and it was documented that additional requests for information increased as a function of the level of organization of the handoff (disorganized to highly organized). The author hypothesized that this finding may imply that better organized handoffs offer more opportunities to expand on the information provided. Patterson et al¹⁸ have suggested, through observation and analysis, that verbal exchanges could be a potential strategy for combating information loss if they can maintain an interactive nature. This idea was supported by the research on shift report mentioned previously (T. Foster-Hunt, unpublished master's thesis, 2009). Furthermore, during synchronous interactions, health care providers are given an opportunity to discuss or question a fellow colleague's point of view, and this can sometimes lead to new ideas or patient care solutions.¹⁹

Problems Associated With Synchronous Communication

The shortcoming of synchronous communication is mainly found in its interruptive nature. When conversing with an individual, it is easy to divert

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