PASSING THE TORCH: THE CHALLENGE OF HANDOFFS

By Kathleen Dracup, RN, DNSc, and Peter E. Morris, MD

Do but take care to express yourself in a plain, easy manner, in well-chosen, significant and decent terms ... labouring as much as possible, not to leave them dark nor intricate, but clear and intelligible.

—Miguel de Cervantes, Preface to Don Quixote

Every day, in every intensive care unit (ICU) in the country, care of patients is transferred from one professional to another. As remarkable as this process is when the complexity of today's severely ill patients is considered, our amazement should intensify when the exact number of transfers is taken into account.

Transfer of responsibility for patients occurs if patients are admitted to the ICU from another unit (eg, the emergency department, a step-down unit) or when patients leave the ICU for surgery or a procedure. Nurse-to-nurse transfers occur at every shift change or for coverage during breaks. Resident-to-resident transfers occur when the medical resident is changing service or has completed a shift. Physician-to-physician transfers occur regularly when the hospital employs hospitalists or intensivists. Interdisciplinary transfers occur when nurses report to physicians and vice versa, as often happens when patients move from one area to another in the hospital. Examples are legion.

Increasingly, transfers of patient care from one person to another are recognized as a point of vulnerability in the process of care; a time when valuable information can and often will be omitted or garbled, leaving critically ill patients at high risk for an error to occur. Generally speaking, the more caregivers who are involved in patient care in a serial fashion, the higher the risk to patients. But what exactly is a handoff and how has it become such a point of vulnerability?

Handoff is the term coined to describe the transfer of role and responsibility from one person to another in a process that might be physical (eg, in a relay race or a hockey game) or mental (eg, among air-traffic controllers passing a plane from one zone to another). In these instances the handoff is practiced hundreds, sometimes thousands of times to make sure no seconds are lost in the transfer or no harm comes to those being transferred.

Given the vulnerability of critically ill patients and the increasing number of handoffs required to allow nursing and medical staff time away from the unit, it is amazing that attention to handoffs has only come within the past few years. It is a topic that was rarely discussed in the nursing literature, despite the fact that it happened 2 to 3 times every day for decades due to changes of shift, and it was almost never discussed in the medical literature.

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The researchers observed handoffs at space shuttle mission control at the NASA Johnson Space Center, 2 Canadian nuclear power plants, a railroad dispatch center in the United States, and an ambulance dispatch center in Toronto. All of these settings required error-free operations and had developed specific strategies to achieve this goal. The strategies that they all shared were as follows:

- Face-to-face verbal update with interactive questioning
- Limited interruptions
- Topics initiated by the person assuming responsibility as well as the person being replaced
- Readback by the incoming person to ensure that information was accurately received
- Current status and historical data assessed by the incoming person
- Information presented in the same order every time
- Written summary of activities that occurred during the shift

In addition, all of the settings employed the social norm that the outgoing person maintained responsibility for the position until the handoff update was complete.

**What We Can Start Doing Now**

The elements of a safe handoff are known. Although some of the elements will be challenging because of our sometimes chaotic physical environments and the lack of time clinicians often have, it is critical that we adopt practices used religiously in other high-risk settings. The statements and opinions contained in this editorial are solely those of the coeditors.

**FINANCIAL DISCLOSURES**

None reported.

**REFERENCES**


