Laura Daniel, PhD and Donamarie N-Wilfong, DNP, RN

A COURSE RESPONSE TO MEDICAL COMMUNICATION ERRORS
HANDOFF COMMUNICATION: DON’T DROP THE BALL!

Introduction

Thousands of medical errors are made in hospitals every year, many due to poor communication. In fact, the Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality (AHRQ) reported that 37% of Intensive Care Unit sentinel events and 61% of Operating Room sentinel events were due to failures in communication. Such distressing statistics highlight the dire need for a re-evaluation and possible modification of the communication training that medical professionals receive. The Joint Commission even recognized this need and made improving communication a national patient safety goal in the years 2007 – 2011. In response, the Simulation, Teaching, and Academic Research (STAR) Center at West Penn Allegheny Healthcare System (WPAHS) hosted a handoff communication conference. Sorrel King, a patient safety advocate, was the main speaker who described her young daughter’s untimely death in a hospital due to communication errors. Following Ms. King, standardized patients portrayed five patient safety scenarios that incorporated a hybrid simulator/live actor combination. These scenarios were later used to develop an online training course, called Handoff Communication: Don’t Drop the Ball to continue the communication education initiative.

Purpose and Objectives

This course was designed for all hospital staff members, with the goal of improving their communication knowledge and skills. The course incorporated instruction on aspects of proper communication from the TeamSTEPPS program, which was developed by the Department of Defense’s Patient Safety Program in collaboration with the Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality (AHRQ). Upon completion of the course, participants were expected to be knowledgeable on the proper techniques that can be used to enhance communication between interprofessional team members. Specifically, participants were expected to understand the concepts of situation awareness, situation monitoring, the SBAR communication tool, the shared mental model and the importance of integrating elements such as call-out and check-back. This research project is designed to evaluate the effectiveness of this hand-off communication course.

Methods

The sample (n = 226) consisted of self-motivated WPAHS employees. Participants may have been directly recruited from STAR course facilitators or the participants may have discovered this course on their own from STAR’s website.

Students’ initial amounts of communication knowledge were assessed through a 15-item pretest that was comprised of both multiple choice questions and true/false questions. Learners then accessed a PowerPoint presentation of didactic communication content. Following the PowerPoint, participants watched five vignetted videos that showcased proper and improper communication. These vignettes were modeled from the scenarios that were shown during the communication conference. Upon completing these course activities, participants were required to take a 15-item posttest to reassess their communication knowledge.

Results

When the conference attendees were asked on an evaluation how much they learned from the presentation, they answered on a 7-point Likert scale that ranged from “Nothing at all” to an “Extremely large amount.” The majority (87.9%) of respondents indicated that they learned a very large amount.

Likewise, this handoff communication course which was modeled from that conference also had positive results. Hundreds of WPAHS employees have taken the Handoff Communication course and the majority of people earned higher scores on the 15-item posttest (M = 14.26, SD = 0.98) than they did on the pretest (M = 10.56, SD = 2.29). This four point mean increase was considered statistically significant with a large effect size, t(225) = 22.70, p < .01, d = 1.51.

Figure 1. Differences in test scores, (posttest – pretest) for each course participant

Discussion

Results from the pre/posttest analysis showed that participants gained communication knowledge, providing evidence that the course is effective. Participants who completed this online course had a more thorough understanding of communication skills. This knowledge is expected to translate to more effective teams in the workplace and eventually lead to an improved quality of care. Furthermore, employees’ refined communication skills are likely to be associated with decreased probabilities of adverse events.

References