Do Not Disturb: Cutting Down on Interruptions for Doctors and Nurses

By Debra Wood, RN, contributor

May 24, 2010 - Call lights, phone calls, alarm bells, colleagues just wanting a minute of your time: interruptions have become a way of life for physicians and nurses on the front lines of healthcare delivery. Yet research shows interruptions can be dangerous. Several organizations have found ways to decrease the risk.

“Healthcare by definition is interruption driven,” says Vineet Arora, M.D., MAPP, assistant professor and assistant dean for scholarship and discovery at the Pritzker School of Medicine at the University of Chicago. “The culture of the way we communicate in healthcare is everything is urgent, and we often overuse that we need the information ‘stat.’”

Arora indicated that when healthcare workers are interrupted, they are taken off task and lose focus, which could lead to an error. Some interruptions are unavoidable.

“If a patient is decompensating and critically sick, you will want to be interrupted and go urgently to the bedside to evaluate that patient,” Arora said. “The question comes when there are interruptions that could be avoided.”

Clinicians at Kaiser Permanente aimed to decrease medication errors and as part of that initiative developed KP MedRite, a standardized, human-centered approach to medication administration. Nurses wear a vest or sash and stand in a protective space to indicate to other people on the unit that they are not to be interrupted while pulling and preparing meds.

“Decreasing interruptions is important, because it allows the nurse to stay focused on the activity they are currently engaged in,” said Scott Heisler, RN, MBA, an innovation specialist with the Innovation Consultancy at Kaiser Permanente. “When a nurse gets distracted, they are put in a dangerous position and potentially could do harm.”

Kaiser Permanente found a decrease in medication errors while piloting the program, but the Innovation Consultancy is no longer measuring the results of KP MedRite.

“Putting on the sash denotes they are engaged in an important activity that requires focus, and they don’t want to be disturbed. But then people and the person wearing the sash need to enforce it,” Heisler said.