

Evidence Bites: Distractions and interruptions

An evidence summary inspired by safety discussions held at the WUTH Safety Summit

What is the impact of distractions and interruptions for clinical staff?

Interruptions affect staff cognitively by interfering with working memory. Although the evidence is limited, interruptions to nurses' work have been identified as contributing to medication administration errors². Healthcare is learning lessons from the aviation industry and the 'sterile cockpit' which is a 'no distraction zone'¹.

How can we reduce interruptions?

- Interventions to reduce interruptions during medication related tasks include the use of "protocol checklists", "interruption vests" and "No-Talk" signage, which have proved useful in reducing interruptions. However, these can have a limited impact if staff get used to their presence².
- Visible signage can be used to indicate a 'no interruption zone'³.
- Sheffield Teaching Hospitals developed a Patient Safety Zone that is achieved by staff performing a defined set of principles while in the presence of the patient. Within the 'patient safety zone' all non-urgent interruptions and distractions are reduced⁴.
- A 2015 study found that implementing a patient safety zone also improved patient satisfaction⁵.
- Educational interventions designed to highlight possible strategies to manage these interruptions could further help minimise errors. A simulated ward round has been used to training medical students on managing interruptions⁶.
- Some clinical areas use a trigger word to signal a 'no interruption zone'⁷.

Further reading

1. [Aviation and healthcare: a comparative review with implications for patient safety](#). Royal Society of Medicine Journal, 2016.
2. [Interruptions to nurses during medication administration: are there implications for the quality of patient care?](#) King's College London Policy +
3. [Pape, T. M., D. M. Guerra, et al. \(2005\). Innovative approaches to reducing nurses' distractions during medication administration](#). Journal of Continuing Education in Nursing 36(3): 108-16; quiz 141-2.
4. [Sheffield Teaching Hospitals: Patient Safety Zone](#)
5. [The effect of a safe zone on nurse interruptions, distractions, and medication administration errors](#). J Infus Nurs. 2015 Mar-Apr;38(2):140-51.
6. [Driven to distraction: a prospective controlled study of a simulated ward round experience to improve patient safety teaching for medical students](#). BMJ Quality and Safety, 2014.
7. [Adopting a 'no interruption zone' for patient safety](#) OR Manager, 2013.

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