

Communicating With The Patient/Family

Everyone has a role in Patient Safety

Timely Contact

Timely communication is probably the most crucial element and the foundation of rebuilding relationships.

The second you learn of the event you need to connect with the patient. It isn't necessary to know everything to make contact. It's far better to contact them rather than make them think they have to contact you to get help.

I think most patients are forgiving of a mistake. They aren't forgiving if they think we are ignoring them or mistreating them.

We used to feel the need to gather all the information. It used to be a few weeks before we would even have a conversation with the patient or family. Now we know that these conversations have to be immediate.

Acknowledging What Has Happened

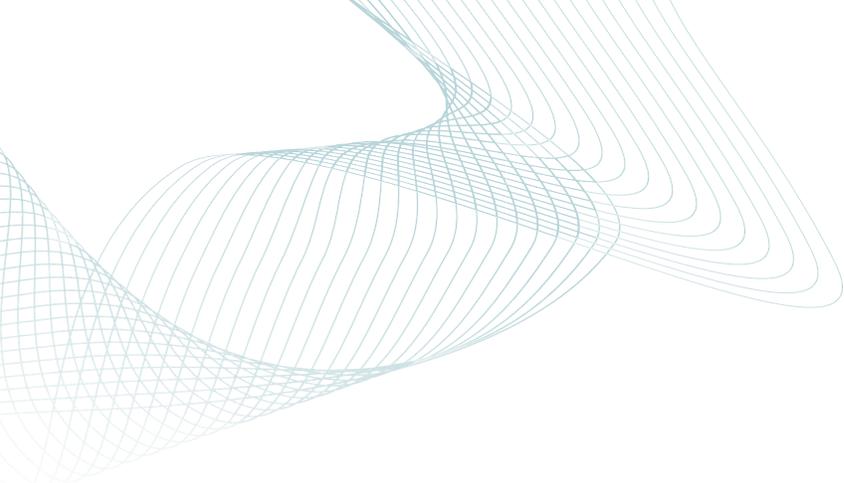
The most important thing that we can do during these first meetings is to acknowledge what has happened, offer a genuine apology, and listen.

To help in these situations, we need to understand the patient and families' questions, beliefs, needs, and perspective. We need to do a lot of listening very early in the process.

If we haven't interacted right away and shared the initial timeline that we understand to be accurate, the timeline that they have in their minds is all that they have. It can be very difficult to recover if we have left inaccurate perceptions that are unaddressed for too long.

Avoiding Speculation

When I initially contacted the family, I thought I was helping by explaining what I thought might have happened. When we shared a different story following the investigation, they lost trust in us because to them the story had changed. Looking back, I should have told them that I wasn't sure and didn't want to guess but that I would share this information when we did know.



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Assigning Responsibility

Communication will only be timely if someone takes ownership of it. In complex cases, and perhaps all cases, this ownership has to be assigned.

Having someone who's only responsibility was to maintain regular contact with the family, find out their questions and needs, identify when their perception isn't aligned with our understanding and constantly push me to be on top of this, was critical. Without this things always got missed.

Accountability for communicating with the patient/family can be missed, delayed or even overlooked if it isn't someone's responsibility.

Disclosure is a Process

Disclosure is a process not just a meeting or a single conversation. In the early stages of disclosure, listening and helping are more important than anything else. Later on it is more about providing information.