

Routine team huddles help improve communication and situational awareness

CAMBRIDGE HEALTH ALLIANCE

Cambridge Health Alliance (CHA) is a vibrant, innovative health system that serves Cambridge, Somerville, and Boston's metro-north region. CHA has three hospital emergency departments, located in Cambridge, Somerville and Everett.

Challenge

When used routinely, team huddles have been shown to improve team culture, communication, and situational awareness. However, the challenge remains to integrate huddles into the busy workflow of an emergency department (ED) in a way that staff finds useful and appropriate.

Action

Cambridge Hospital emergency department utilizes two types of team huddles – one that happens routinely at the start of each shift, and one that occurs on an as-needed basis when the ED needs to decompress. The shift-to-shift safety huddle involves nurses, nursing assistants, and sometimes providers, who get together for a brief huddle at the nurse's station prior to the start of the new shift. The huddle is led by the charge nurse and includes a brief overview of the ED's current state, including how many patients and boarders are in the ED at the time. In addition, they complete a safety review that highlights the current patient safety concerns, including patients at high-risk for falls, elopement or other risks. Finally, the team discusses any operational challenges that might impact the shift, including equipment that needs repair or supplies that are running short.

In addition, there are times, mid-shift, when the team needs to come together again to manage capacity challenges in the ED. Associate chief nursing officer, Danielle Bobek, calls it "running the board," and essentially, it's an ad-hoc huddle that pulls the ED team together to make a plan to decompress the ED. This huddle may be called by the charge nurse or an attending and involves a review of all the patients to identify what patients need to get closer to a disposition. They ask the questions, "Who's sick, who's not sick," and, "Who's waiting for what?" By looking at each patient individually to understand their needs, the team can plan and prioritize. It's a collaborative effort between providers and nurses to figure out how best to move forward. Once the team identifies their needs, they are able to redirect resources to address the needs.

Keys to success

Overall, the shift-change huddle increases situational awareness and helps the team plan for a successful shift. Ultimately, says Bobek, the ED team "has to manage the chaos together," and the mid-shift huddles help them do this in a way that is both collaborative and effective.