

Safety Competencies Curriculum

Domain 6: Recognize, Respond and Disclose Adverse Events

DOMAIN 6 CASE DISCUSSION: DISCLOSURE OF AN ADVERSE EVENT

I was on call one weekend as the attending pediatrician. I was on my way home, when I was called back urgently as they were “running a code” on one of the patients. The child was a little boy with a complex medical history who had never left the hospital, as he was so fragile. He required oxygen for chronic lung disease, and would desaturate very quickly without it. He thus required very close monitoring. He was perfectly fine when I had seen him less than an hour before, so I was quite perplexed about what had gone wrong.

When I arrived back on the ward, he had been asystolic for about 10 minutes. The code team continued their attempts at reviving the little boy, but was unsuccessful, and the child died.

I spoke to the bedside and charge nurses to get an understanding of what had gone wrong. The bedside nurse had removed the monitors during bathing, and forgot to replace them when she went to answer the telephone. The task of answering the telephone had been delegated to her as the ward clerk was gone for lunch. The child was found approximately 5 minutes later with the oxygen cannulae displaced, unresponsive.

My most immediate reaction was fury over the carelessness of the nurse. I then took one look at the anguish on her face and excused myself so as not to say something in the moment that I would regret later. After a few minutes of pacing around, literally kicking concrete walls and muttering to myself in a utility closet, I regained my composure and joined the team. We reviewed the incident again in detail. I asked the nurse to be sure to document a factual time-based account of the events, and I did the same. When we reflected on the event, the system problem that we noted that contributed was tasking bedside nurses to answer the telephone when ward clerks are absent.. I did my best to support the bedside nurse, but it was clear that there was very little that I or the charge nurse could say that would allow her to feel better. She was physically ill, and left for home shortly after the event occurred.

The child’s parents were in their home community and were unreachable for several hours when the event occurred. With the assistance of local police, we eventually found the family, and had them come in for a very difficult conversation.