

Wisconsin Hospital Association, Inc.

NEWS



Contact: Mary Kay Grasmick, WHA 608-274-1820 or 575-7516 (cell)

Wisconsin Hospitals Standardize Patient Color-Coded Alerts

Wisconsin Hospital Association leads statewide effort

MADISON (June 25, 2008) --- Wisconsin joins more than a dozen states that are standardizing their approach to hospital color-coded alerts. The move to have all hospitals standardize to the same colors was initiated by the Wisconsin Hospital Association.

Many Wisconsin hospitals use color-coded alerts as a way of quickly identifying important information about patients. Wristbands, stickers and placards are commonly used to identify allergy warnings, fall risks, or do-not-resuscitate (DNR) orders. However, until now, there has not been a standard that offers direction to hospitals as to what color identifies which alert. Many health professionals work in multiple health care settings, so they must memorize multiple, sometimes conflicting, color-coded alert systems.

The move to standardize color-coded alerts was fueled by reports of serious medical errors being narrowly averted. Last year in Wisconsin, a patient was being treated at Upland Hills Health in Dodgeville with a serious heart condition. Later, he was transported to a Madison hospital for advanced heart care. Upon arrival at the Madison hospital, a nurse commented on his "DNR" wristband. "Randy" and his wife were horrified to learn that the patient name band used for identification at Upland Hills Health in Dodgeville was the same blue color as the wristband the Madison hospital used to identify patients with a "Do Not Resuscitate" wish. Fortunately, the misinterpretation was immediately clarified and the wristband was removed before any life-sustaining care was withheld. These "near misses" highlight a potential source of error and an opportunity to improve patient safety by re-evaluating the use of color-coded alerts.

Fourteen states to date have standardized color codes while several more are considering it. While there is not an official national standard, a majority of states that have standardized have chosen the same colors. With the help of a WHA Task Force that included representatives from Upland Hills Health and other hospitals and health care organizations, Wisconsin is now in the process of implementing color-coded alert standards.

The standardized colors chosen for alerts in Wisconsin are:

- White or Clear for Patient Identification
- Purple for DNR
- Red for Allergy
- Yellow for Fall Risk

Dana Richardson, WHA vice president, quality initiatives, said the move to standardize was praised by hospital leaders.

“We have a lot of movement of both patients and health care providers in multiple settings, even across state lines,” Richardson said. “Standardizing how we alert these professionals to patient conditions just makes good sense. It is our hope to eventually see a national color standard set for these alerts.” Wisconsin and Minnesota have standardized to the same set of colors, while Illinois, Michigan and Indiana are currently reviewing their alert systems.

Richardson said hospitals are asking patients to remove “social cause” wristbands, which can also be a potential source of confusion for care givers.

While this is a voluntary program, the Wisconsin Hospital Association’s goal is for 100 percent of hospitals to make the transition to the standard colors by March 1, 2009.

For more information related to the color code alert standards and patient safety, visit www.wiCheckPoint.org. Click on consumer information.

###