

Better communication key to effective healthcare

Taking steps to ensure doctors are communicating effectively can help save lives, explains Dr Rob Galloway.

When I first became a consultant, I asked a member of my team to cross match four units of blood for a complex patient I had just seen. But 40 minutes later there was no blood transfusion ready.

After I called out to ask why there was no blood, my F2 turned to me, rather embarrassed, and said that she had told me 20 minutes ago, that the lab had called and said the blood sample had been mislabelled.

But I had not heard. I had been concentrating on supervising the chest drains that my registrar was

putting in. And because I had not heard, my patient had not had the blood transfusion she needed. She had suffered, not because of a lack of knowledge or a lack of dedication, but because of human factors.

The traditional view would be that as a consultant I should have concentrated harder and the delay in blood was my fault. I would have felt bad, tried to concentrate more in the future and invariably the problem would have been repeated very soon.

So what could have stopped this error from happening? To stop it we would have needed my F2 to say: "Team leader are you ready to receive information?"

But that doesn't happen. The honest reason why that doesn't happen is that we worry that we would sound silly. We need to get over this 'silly factor' and communicate effectively with our colleagues, if we want to prevent errors. We need to embrace human factors; even if we are worried we may sound a bit stupid.

But that was not all that was needed to ensure that I had registered the information and acted upon it. People talk about learning from the airline industry but there are many other industries to learn from. Never has my local Chinese take-away got my order wrong – because they repeat back my order. But in medicine we are not used to that process, even though it prevents errors. Again, because it just feels odd. If we can communicate like this for sweet and sour pork (Hong Kong style), we should do so for our patients.

An understanding of how professionals work together and communicate will allow us to prevent errors with simple techniques, leading to better patient care.

Many of us have worked for a number of years on improving human factors for all staff from healthcare assistants to hospital directors. At BSMS we have increased teaching about human factors throughout the curriculum. Our Year 5 safety conference and preparation for practice module were both highlighted in a recent General Medical Council report on teaching safer care at medical school.

Dr Galloway is an A&E Consultant at Brighton and Sussex University Hospitals NHS Trust and Year 5 BSMS Subdean. He runs regular one-day free courses on human factors for health trainers and staff with Health Education Kent, Surrey and Sussex. For further information please contact timothy.chatten@bsuh.nhs.uk.