

Speaking Up for Safety

Psychological Safety for Safe Hospital Systems – Physician Perspective

Introduction

This activity walks you through a simulated interaction between a nurse and a physician regarding hand hygiene prior to central line placement. You will play the role of the physician. To get the most out of this exercise, choose the responses that you feel you WOULD do, not what you think the best answer is.

After the simulation exercise, you will be presented with tips for creating psychological safety.

Effective communication and teamwork are essential for the delivery of high quality, safe patient care. The complexity of medical care, coupled with the inherent limitations of human performance, make it critically important that clinicians have standardized communication tools and create an environment in which individuals can speak up and express concerns. Developing a psychologically safe environment can improve patient safety.

Psychological safety for safe hospital systems

The highest performing teams have psychological safety – the shared belief that it is acceptable to speak up about concerns, mistakes, or questions.

Psychological safety allows for:

- Interpersonal risk taking
- Speaking your mind/speaking up
- Asking questions
- Admitting mistakes

It is important to foster a psychologically safe environment – one where team members feel they can speak up.

What do you do?

You are the physician on call overnight in the Surgical Intensive Care Unit. A 45 year old male presents with a fever, cough, shortness of breath and abdominal pain. His heart rate is 120 beats per minute and his blood pressure is 86/50. You determine that he needs central access for fluid resuscitation, antibiotics, and vasopressor support. As you prepare, his next blood pressure reading is 78/48. You set up to place a central line, prep the patient and put on your gown and gloves. As you start to put the drape on the patient, the nurse who is working with you says, “I don’t think you performed hand hygiene before putting on your gloves.” You think you did perform hand hygiene, but are not 100% sure. What do you say and do?

Option 1: Say, “You weren’t watching closely enough, I did,” and then continue with the procedure.

Option 2: Say, “Thank you! I think I did, but I’m not sure. Can we grab another central line kit so I can begin again to be sure?”

Option 3: Say, “Who is the doctor here?” and continue the procedure.

Answer key



Option 1: This response does not facilitate psychological safety. The nurse could be uncomfortable continuing to push the issue, and bringing up issues in the future, which could compromise patient safety.



Option 2: Excellent! You approached this situation collaboratively. This response creates psychological safety for the nurse to speak up.



Option 3: This response does not facilitate psychological safety and is dismissive of the nurse’s training and experience. This could also cause the nurse to be uncomfortable bringing up issues now and in the future.

Case conclusion

The nurse you are working with runs to grab another central line kit. While he is gone, you clean up the old kit and properly dispose of the sharp instruments that were included. When he returns, you set up again to perform a central line. This time, you are careful to perform hand hygiene before putting on your gown and gloves. This allows the procedure to run safely, and your patient does not end up developing an infection.

Tips for creating psychological safety

Team leaders and members can increase psychological safety to speak up by:

- Promoting learning from one another.
- Acknowledging the limits of their own knowledge.
- Not ignoring team members.
- Not being rude, disrespectful, or belittling to team members.
- Explicitly encouraging team members to speak up.

Key phrases to promote psychological safety for Speaking Up

- “If you see anything amiss, please speak up. We’re a team and we have to have each other’s backs.”
- “It’s fine to disagree. That’s why we’re talking about this together.”
- “Just like they say for homeland security – ‘If you see something, say something.’”
- “Thanks for pointing out my mistake. You just saved me from a big blunder.”
- “I’m not sure I’ve done this right. Can someone check me?”