The Perioperative Highway Code

SIGNS - Safety Initiative Group for National Signage

When what you see is what you get!

Inspired by the success of the nationally implemented ‘Difficult Airway Trolley’ signage (Barley n.d.) which all perioperative practitioners will be familiar with, a team of anaesthetic consultants and trainees from different hospital and perioperative settings have come together to work on a national Signs Project – The Safety Initiative Group for National Signage – with an aim to develop the first perioperative highway code.

Their vision: to create a universal standardised signage system within the perioperative environment for emergency clinical drugs and equipment that will be utilised in all operating suites within the NHS. Emergency response times, crisis resource management and patient safety should all undeniably benefit as a result.

The team recognise the challenges faced by today’s complex clinical areas, which include highly specialised and evolving equipment, high trainee turnover, new recruits and agency staff, all of which have the potential to contribute to a lack of familiarity within the environment and which could inevitably have a direct impact on patient safety. The Association of Anaesthetists of Great Britain and Ireland state that ‘equipment and drugs for rarely encountered emergencies must be available’ and that the ‘location must be clearly signed’ (AAGBI 2012). With this in mind, they felt there was a prerequisite for a standardised emergency signage system to be designed and utilised throughout the NHS, and in support of their own associations’ guidelines, have embarked on the gargantuan journey to provide this.

Effective signs depend on quick recognition and comprehension by all personnel involved without the requirement for additional explanatory text. The International Organisation for Standardisation (ISO) defines a sign or graphical symbol as ‘a visually perceptible figure with a particular meaning used to transmit information independently of language’ (Graphical Symbols-ISO 22727-2007-Geneva- http://www.iso.org/iso/graphical-symbols).

To date, the team have developed variants for 12 emergency signs, all in compliance with British and International ISO regulations. Some of the examples are illustrated below.

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The team gathered ideas and opinions from multidisciplinary team members by undertaking two phases of a modified Delphi Study in paper format. The Delphi technique is a widely used method to gather data from respondents within a domain of expertise and therefore, very suitable for this type of research. The work of this group was presented to the Safe Anaesthesia Liaison Group (SALG) and to the Board of the Association for Perioperative Practice (AfPP) by Dr Trudie Phillips and Dr Queenie Lo late last year. Their project has been named SALG April Safety Project of the Month and received 3rd place in the Patient Safety Prize at the AAGBI Congress 2015.

The project was shared at the European Operating Room Nurses Association (EORNA) meeting in November and was received with much interest and enquiry. There are 28 countries represented on this board so the potential for an international -SIGNS- safety campaign at this level is very clear.

It is great news to hear that the team have now secured a sponsor for the project in Pentland Medical Ltd and plans for the future involve undertaking further research in the form of national delphi, judgement and comprehension tests fully compliant to BS-ISO standards to launch a nationally recognised set of graphical symbols that should demonstrate an improvement in critical emergency response times and crisis resource management. These signs will be used within the perioperative environment, to label and identify key equipment with clarity and ease.

The majority of these signs are also transferable across other areas of the hospital such as accident and emergency, labour ward, post anaesthetic care units and so the potential to improve signage in these critical environments is clear for all to see.

AfPP fully supports this innovative and brave initiative and we invite comments and feedback from our members should you wish to engage. Those who are attending the AfPP residential event in York will have the opportunity to peruse this further and see firsthand how this will work when the time comes to launch this project as it most surely will.

When this team introduced the project at our board meeting almost a year ago they delivered their ideas with such passion, enthusiasm and conviction that the decision to endorse the project was made unanimously by the trustees on the day. At the time, I think it is worthy of note that the project had been funded directly from the personal resources of the team involved.

In my view this is one of the most important patient safety initiatives of recent times and we at AfPP are delighted to be involved with the SIGNS team shoulder to shoulder in support of this initiative.

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**References**

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