

The NGO perspective: SAFE operating theatre

Mona Guckian Fisher

Correspondence: mona@guckianfisher.com

Universal access to safe, timely, affordable surgical and anaesthetic care is a basic human right, yet more than 4 million people worldwide lack access to quality health services. This is mostly explained by a human resource shortage compounded by the fact that the skills, competencies and clinical experience of providers are often poorly suited to the health needs of the populations being served.

Nurses play a pivotal role, caring and supporting patients throughout the continuum of life. As a professional group they advocate for health promotion and support and education of patients and the public on the prevention of illness and injury, providing care and assisting in cure and rehabilitation across global communities. No other healthcare professional has such a broad and far-reaching role. Nurses are teachers, advocates, caregivers, critical thinkers and innovators. This honourable profession puts nurses at the heart and soul of the healthcare system in every country.

The Nursing Now campaign (<https://nigelcrisp.com/nursing-now/>), run in collaboration with the World Health Organization (WHO) and International Council of Nurses (ICN), aims to raise the status and profile of nursing, empowering nurses to take their place at the heart of tackling 21st-century health challenges. The campaign launched globally on 27 February 2018 with events worldwide and runs until the end of 2020.

Safety is a challenge inside and outside the operating theatre; recent visits to developing countries provide evidence on additional challenges in infrastructure, where the potential for care in the surgical setting is clearly indicated. There are high-rise buildings with scaffolding made from sticks where construction workers are at serious risk of injury whilst working at height. It is indeed difficult to observe this, in contrast to our first-world regulated safety systems. If the old adage 'prevention is better than cure' still holds good, then there are opportunities for collegiate non-governmental organisations (NGOs) to assist us in the prevention and safety trajectory.

Wherever we are in the world, the basic minimum perioperative team will consist of the anaesthetist, surgeon and registered nurse or, in the UK, registered operating department practitioner.

There are numerous NGOs, charities and individuals involved in delivering support across the globe. In 2010 the first SAFE course (Safer Anaesthesia from Education) was developed in obstetric anaesthesia followed by paediatric anaesthesia by the Association of Anaesthetists of Great Britain & Ireland (AAGBI) and the World Federation of Societies of Anaesthesiologists (WFSA). This has now been successfully delivered in a number of countries: 59 courses have been run and more than 2000 delegates have been trained.

The SAFE OR programme was developed collaboratively, with an initial aim to bring practitioners to a level of practice whereby they could deliver vigilant and competent anaesthesia. This educational programme has been extended to include the other team disciplines of surgery, and more recently nursing, to produce multidisciplinary service delivery teams offering a carefully balanced mix of clinicians to address the full training needs identified.

These courses have shown that, although education can be developed for individual specialties, there is much more to gain from training the whole team working in the operating room. Through this concept, the SAFE OR course was developed, with partners in the Royal College of Surgeons (RCS), Association for Perioperative Practice (AfPP) and now the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists (RCOG).

The perioperative setting is a unique practice environment. Provision of safe and effective care in all areas of a surgical services suite requires a complex organisational structure, utilising a diverse skill mix from numerous personnel. In addition, within this multifaceted setting, various members of the surgical team may have conflicting goals and objectives. Because this environment is so complex and intense at times, effective leadership and communication skills are crucial in order to bring these diverse workers together to provide safe care and achieve positive patient outcomes, including prevention of (1) surgical site infections, (2) medication errors, (3) wrong-site surgery and (4) other preventable complications related to surgical intervention.

Nursing skills are essential for the delivery of most healthcare, but are commonly ignored in the various debates about increasing capacity. In surgical nursing,

Mona Guckian Fisher RGN, LLM, BSc (Hons), OHND, DipHSWW, CMIOSH, Dip Perioperative Nursing, Dip Counselling
President
International Federation of Perioperative Nurses (IFPN)
and
Immediate Past President
Association for Perioperative Practice (AfPP)

the small UK-based charity Friends of African Nursing (FoAN), established in 2002, has successfully delivered education and support to 2000 nurses with an unbelievable minimal resource, mostly achieved from coffee mornings and the dedicated altruism of a few perioperative nurses.

In 2017 and 2018 two self-funded perioperative nurses engaged on an educational tour of southern India and provided training sessions on patient safety, staff welfare, nursing leadership and empowerment along with other aspects of clinical practice to over 1000 nurses. During our work we have discovered similar lessons: the perioperative team is the essential ingredient that makes possible the objective of the NGOs working in these settings.

The SAFE OR course is the first time that nurses have been engaged in a team education programme from the start of the writing to joining the courses. When Team 'SAFE OR' travelled to Addis Ababa in Ethiopia in September 2017, nurses were part of a cohesive UK team working with Ethiopian colleagues, a powerful example of what can be achieved if cultural attitudes can be set aside in the name of providing safe and timely perioperative patient care. Of the 35 participants in Ethiopia who attended, 17 were nurses, a clear indication of the investment that is needed for that professional discipline.

We need to see a change in the way that the nursing profession is viewed by surgeons, anaesthetists, community leaders, governments, the WHO and NGOs to create significant change in the perceived value of the profession. The Nursing Now campaign aims to improve the perceptions of nurses, enhance their influence and maximise their contributions to ensure that everyone everywhere has access to health and healthcare.

Collectively, nursing professionals need to ensure that they are visible, have input and value at the forefront of healthcare and are a part of these planned initiatives. There are hierarchical and cultural issues to address and whole-team engagement is the only way to start to tackle this important reality. It will take time and commitment but, if built into every training package as an important part of the overall engagement, then we will begin to see and reap the benefits in terms of team cohesiveness and patient outcomes.

Many of these nurses are well educated but are struggling with limited resources, and many identify the need for support to set standards of practice that can empower them and the entire team. This is where team training cannot be surpassed.

The NGO experience of surgeons, anaesthetists and nurses working collaboratively as an integrated professional group, to educate inform and empower, is a thrilling and worthwhile experience.

Changes that empower the nursing team from the NGO experience are simple to achieve, such as employing the safety checklist, communicating with colleagues, saying thank you, developing suitable standards and protocols, assuring correct patient identification, asking for help, ensuring that consent is signed, assuring scrub nurse responsibility for patient and procedure identification, checking the patient, building capacity for sharing knowledge, implementing a whiteboard count, improving nursing documentation, utilising checklists for instruments, improving the process for preoperative assessment, resolving conflicts within the team, improving teamwork with other professionals for the safety of the patient and generally improving understanding and communication.

VALUE STATEMENT: 'NURSES MAKE A DIFFERENCE'

Managing the perioperative environment is not an easy task, but effective leadership is critical to the success of the department. Effective leaders can create a working environment that promotes staff satisfaction and productivity, thereby contributing to the overall success of the operating theatre. Conversely, ineffective leadership can result in a loss of staff morale and productivity and ultimately have a negative impact on the patient, the department and the organisation.

Success in the perioperative practice setting includes the provision of safe and effective patient care and achieving optimal outcomes. To realise these successes, this work environment requires strong, consistent, knowledgeable nurse leaders who are visible, inspire others and can motivate the multidisciplinary team using effective communication. We are all responsible for contributing to this outcome.