

Background

Healthcare professionals are increasingly being employed simultaneously in multiple hospitals and other healthcare settings, and many facilities supplement local healthcare professionals with registry and traveling staff members. In addition, patients are being transferred between facilities during care. It is imperative that operational processes within hospitals/health systems take these combined factors into consideration when developing patient alert communication plans in individual facilities.

These patient safety and quality concerns led the Tennessee Hospital Association (THA) to examine the use of color-coded patient alert wristbands in Tennessee hospitals. **The use of color-coded patient alert wristbands is not a substitute for medical record review, but serves as a reminder to caregivers to review a patient's medical record prior to making critical care choices.** Based on the need to provide caregivers across Tennessee with a consistent patient alert message delivery system, THA has determined the following:

- Hospitals/health systems that do not currently use color-coded patient alert wristbands should not start to do so.
- Hospitals/health systems that currently use color-coded patient alert wristbands, and wish to continue doing so, are advised to adopt the following three standards: red for allergy, yellow for fall risk and purple for do-not-resuscitate (DNR).
- Hospitals/health systems that use other color-coded visual cues, such as stickers or labels to communicate patient risk factors, should ensure these cues' colors and language correspond with the standardized alert wristbands when appropriate.

Wristband Color	Communicates
Red	ALLERGY
Yellow	FALL RISK
Purple	DNR

The Impact of Adoption

It is anticipated that adoption of standardized colors for wristbands statewide will result in improved quality of health care by reducing the risk that patients will receive incorrect care due to caregivers' misunderstanding of the meanings of color-coded alert wristbands used to communicate clinical information.

The cost impact to healthcare facilities should be negligible. Facilities may incur incremental costs associated with embossing or preprinting information on color-coded alert wristbands if they do not already do so.

There will be an operational impact on facilities whose policies regarding wristband use are significantly different from this guidance. Transitioning to a new set of colors/meanings may itself potentially increase risk of error in the short term; however, this risk can be minimized through staff education and reinforcement during the transition period.

There is no set timeframe by which facilities using color-coded wristbands must adopt the standardized colors and meanings. This allows facilities to use up existing stock and schedule a transition at a time that minimizes confusion for staff. However, THA is striving to have every Tennessee hospital that currently uses alert wristbands to standardize by Dec. 31, 2009.

To assist in implementation, THA has created this toolkit, which includes resources developed in other states that have adopted standardized colors for wristbands.

Summary

Tennessee hospitals, as well as other healthcare facilities, are encouraged to voluntarily adopt standardized colors of wristbands or other visual cues, such as stickers or labels, by Dec. 31, 2009. A clearly defined and consistently implemented practice for identifying and communicating patient risk factors or special needs will support safe patient care.

Tennessee facilities implementing standardization of wristbands at their facility should develop policies and protocols that address the application of wristbands, patient and/or family education, staff education, and handoff communication for transfers within the facility or to another healthcare setting.