



Is the Time Right?

Moving from Color Codes to Plain Language Alerts in Hospitals

Presented to: Integrated Public Health & Healthcare System Preparedness Summit

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Northwestern Memorial Hospital & NM Lake Forest Hospital

Color Codes to Plain Language Alerts in Hospitals

Agenda

- Objectives
- Current State of Emergency Codes
- Our experience
- Implementation of Plain Language Emergency Announcements
- Plain Language Activity
- Summary

Color Codes to Plain Language Alerts in Hospitals

Objectives

Participants will be able to:

- Describe the benefits of using plain language for hospital emergency alerts and determine the feasibility of converting from color coded alerts in their organizations
- Utilize available resources to develop a plan for implementation of plain language alerts

Color Codes to Plain Language Alerts in Hospitals

Current State

- Code Nomenclature Varies:
 - Colors
 - Numbers
 - Letters
 - Names

Color	FHA	HASCA	OHA	NM
Red	Fire	Fire	Fire	Fire
Blue	Cardiac Resp Arrest	Med Emerg-Adult	Cardio/Resp Arrest	Adult +PALS = Peds
Pink	Infant/Child Abduction	Infant Abduction	(Amber)	Infant Abduction
Black	Bomb		Bomb	Weather
Orange	HazMat/ Bioterrorism	Haz Mat Spill	Haz Mat	Haz Mat
Gray	Violence/Security Alert	Combative person	Combative Person	Security Assistance
White	Hostage	Med Emerg-Pediatric		High Census
Yellow	Lockdown	Bomb Threat	Disaster Plan	Trauma
Green	Mass Casualty	Code Triage	(External Triage)	Code Triage
Brown	Severe Weather			Not used
Silver	Active Shooter	Active Shooter		(2 hospitals)

Color Codes to Plain Language Alerts in Hospitals

Pennsylvania Patient Safety Advisory, March 2015

Figure 1. Number of Distinct Codes by Condition

Disruptive/combatative person (15)	Adult medical emergencies (15)	Bomb threat (7)	Rapid response (7)	Pediatric medical emergencies (6)	Infant/child abduction (4)	Fall (4)	(1)	(1)	(1)	(1)	(1)	(1)	(1)
				Hazardous material spill (6)			Active shooter (6)	(1)	(1)	(1)	(1)	(1)	
Decontamination team (7)		Emergency C-section (6)	Fire (4)		Patient assist/lift (3)	Lockdown (3)		Weather event(2)	STEMI alert(2)				
				Trauma alert requiring OR intervention (2)		Newborn unresponsive (2)							
Emergency internal/external (15)		Patient elopement/missing (12)	Stroke(8)										

Color Codes to Plain Language Alerts in Hospitals

Pennsylvania Patient Safety Advisory, March 2015

Figure 2. Number of Conditions Associated with Distinct Codes, by Category

White (7)	Silver (7)	Gray/grey (4)	Brown (3)		Zero (2)	(1)	(1)	(1)	(1)	(1)	(1)	(1)	(1)	(1)	(1)	(1)	(1)
			Pink (5)	STAT (3)	Blue (3)	Rescue (2)	(1)	(1)	(1)	(1)	(1)	(1)	(1)	(1)	(1)	(1)	(1)
Purple (7)	Green (7)	99 (6)				Red (6)	Adam (2)	Man-power (2)	(1)	(1)	(1)	(1)	(1)	(1)	(1)	(1)	(1)
			Yellow (10)	Black (3)	Lock-down (2)		(1)	(1)	(1)	(1)	(1)	(1)	(1)	(1)	(1)	(1)	(1)
4 (3)	9 (2)	(1)				(1)	(1)	(1)	(1)	(1)	(1)	(1)	(1)	(1)	(1)	(1)	(1)

■ Color
 ■ Letter(s)
 ■ Name
 ■ Number
 ■ Word

Color Codes to Plain Language Alerts in Hospitals

So What?

- Is it really necessary to protect patients and visitors?
- Variation between organizations – Increases training requirements for employees, agency/contract personnel, emergency response personnel
- Color or term confusion – Risk to patients, staff and facility

Color Codes to Plain Language Alerts in Hospitals

Missouri

**Official: Joplin tornado taught us the need for
brevity, honesty**

10:57 AM - January 31, 2014



"The old theory was you didn't want to scare people, but in some cases it's more helpful for people to know what's going on...It gets their cooperation faster and helps people to calm down," he said [**Mercy Hospitals'** Steve Bollin] (Bernhard, [*St. Louis Post-Dispatch*](#), 1/30).

Color Codes to Plain Language Alerts in Hospitals

So What?

“In 1999, the West Anaheim Medical Center announced a code meant for a violent/combatative patient after a man entered the hospital carrying a gun. Following established protocols, several hospital employees proceeded to the area was armed with a gun. The man opened fire and killed three hospital employees...”

“Operator called a [Code] Team instead of Code Green...”

Color Codes to Plain Language Alerts in Hospitals

Hartford Connecticut

Not long ago, a Hartford Hospital doctor was seeing patients at the Hospital of Central Connecticut (HOCC) when a disturbing announcement crackled overhead: “Code Silver.” At Hartford Hospital, Code Silver means an armed intruder. Remembering his training, the frightened doctor ordered a lockdown, while his HOCC colleagues stood by, looking confused.

At HOCC, Code Silver signals a missing elderly person – serious, of course, but no cause for widespread panic.

Network News. Hartford Health Care. November 2015

Color Codes to Plain Language Alerts in Hospitals

So What?

“Code Blue” used in two ways at a hospital: adult resuscitation and in Labor & Delivery to summon NICU staff during a potential difficult delivery....A patient on post partum arrest, a Code Blue was called by a post partum unit and the NICU and Respiratory team responded.

This was the event that prompted the change to plain language code alerts at that hospital

Color Codes to Plain Language Alerts in Hospitals

Why Plain Language?

- Eliminates code confusion
- Simplifies training
- Improves response & response times
- Supports patient & visitor response during events requiring immediate response: fire, tornado, armed intruder, etc.

Color Codes to Plain Language Alerts in Hospitals

Why Plain Language – Government Guidance

All communications between organizational elements during an incident, whether oral or written, should be in plain language; this ensures that information dissemination is timely, clear, acknowledged, and understood by all intended recipients. Codes should not be used, and all communications should be confined to essential messages. The use of acronyms should be avoided during incidents requiring the participation of multiple agencies or organizations.

National Incident Management System, 2008

Color Codes to Plain Language Alerts in Hospitals

Moving to Plain Language - NMH

- Emergency Management Committee tasked with planning & implementation
- Little to no overhead paging simplified the project
- Developed plain language to be used during paging system outages
- Hybrid: Code Pink, Dr Fairbanks

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Moving to Plain Language – NMH, 2002

Current Names	New (Plain Language) Call	Overhead Announcement Term (During Paging System Disruption)
Cardiac Arrest (adult)	Cardiac Arrest - Adult	Adult Cardiac Arrest Team to (Building + Room #)
Cardiac Arrest (pediatric)	Cardiac Arrest - Pediatric	Pediatric Cardiac Arrest Team to (Building + Room #)
Airway Emergency	Airway Emergency	Airway Emergency Team to
Stroke	Stroke	Stroke Team to
Code Blue (Prentice only)	Neonatal Resuscitation	Neonatal Resuscitation Team to.....
Code Green (Prentice only)	Neonatal Delivery	Neonatal Delivery Team to.....
Code Orange (Prentice only)	Crash C-Section	C-section Team to
Code Yellow	Name of disruption e.g., flood, phone outage, etc.	Emergency Ops Team to.....
Medical Emergency	Medical Emergency	Medical Emergency Response Team to.....
Trauma (ED use only)	Trauma	Trauma Team to.....
Fire	Fire	Emergency Ops Team to.....
Code Pink (missing infant)	Unchanged	Code Pink + Building
Dr. Fairbanks (workplace violence situation)	Dial 6-2311 - Name Unchanged	Dr. Fairbanks to.....
Operation Triage	Unchanged	Operation Triage is now in effect
Code Decon E(D use only)	Haz Mat Team	Haz Mat Team to Emergency Department

Color Codes to Plain Language Alerts in Hospitals

Moving to Plain Language – The Work Continues

- Sister hospital moving to new facility 2017
- Desire to minimize overhead announcements
- Planning transition from code nomenclature to plain language
- Opportunity to improve NMH plain language and standardize between hospitals

Color Codes to Plain Language Alerts in Hospitals

Moving to Plain Language – Resources

- Colorado Hospital Association Emergency Code Implementation Guide
- Minnesota Hospital Association Plain Language Emergency Overhead Paging
- Missouri Hospital Association Standardized, Plain Language Emergency Codes Implementation Guide
- North Carolina Hospital Association Implementation Guide – Standardized, Plain Language Emergency Alerts
- Florida Hospital Association Overhead Emergency Codes – 2014 Hospital Guidelines
- Other states with plain language initiatives: Wisconsin, Iowa

Color Codes to Plain Language Alerts in Hospitals

Moving to Plain Language – Plan

- Project Timeline
- Policy/Protocol development
 - Document & test
- Technology assessment
- Communications
 - Awareness building
 - Instructive
- Training
- Implementation
- Performance Monitoring & Evaluation

Color Codes to Plain Language Alerts in Hospitals

Moving to Plain Language – Samples of Plain Language Alerts

- Weather Alert “Weather Alert + Type + Instructions
- Cardiac Arrest “Medical Alert + Medical Emergency + Location
- Fire Alarm/Fire “Facility Alert + Fire/Smoke Alarm + Descriptor + Location
- Abduction “Security Alert + Descriptor (threat & location)

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Plain Language Example: Brigham and Women's Hospital

“ a 39-word script that was read aloud over the hospital's PA system moments after the first shots rang out: “A life-threatening situation now exists at Watkins Clinic B—Shapiro 2. All persons should immediately move away from that location if it is safe to do so. If it is not safe to move away, shelter in place immediately.”

“There's been a longstanding tradition of using these emergency color codes in hospitals,” Goralnick says. “But from the feedback we have gotten from staff, patients, and families, clarity and transparency are critical.”

Eric Goralnick, medical director of emergency preparedness at BWH

When It Comes to Hospital Shootings, Emergency Color Codes Don't Work.
Boston Magazine, July 2015

Color Codes to Plain Language Alerts in Hospitals

Moving to Plain Language – Group Activity

- Each Table Discuss
 - Barriers to implementation at your facilities
 - Develop plain language alert for:
 - Infant Abduction
 - Tornado
 - Bomb Threat
 - Power Outage
 - Active Shooter
 - Patient Elopement
 - Fire

Color Codes to Plain Language Alerts in Hospitals

Moving to Plain Language – Summary

- Variations in code nomenclature poses risks to patients, visitors & staff
- Plain language emergency alerts may simplify training and improve overall response particularly for events that require immediate response by all affected (fire, tornado, armed intruder)
- Resources are available to guide the transition to plain language alerts

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Questions?

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Thank You

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