

Putting the Pieces Together: Airway Simulation for ER/ICU Nursing Staff

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Designed to enhance preparedness and awareness among nursing staff at VA Black Hills Healthcare System, participants were challenged to "put the pieces together" during a high-stress, low-frequency, high-risk airway management simulation exercise. Left to right: Heidi Matthew, RN; Joanna Danielson, RN. Photographer: Kayla Cooper, RN

The Clinical Education Department at VA Black Hills Healthcare System (VABHCS) Fort Meade in South Dakota faced the challenge of reconstructing competencies for nursing units across the Fort Meade and Hot Springs campuses. With two new clinical educators on board and inspired by Donna Wright's "Competency Assessment Field Guide," the clinical nurse educator team decided to introduce a simulation scenario with a unique twist. The emergency room (ER) and intensive care unit (ICU) nursing staff requested hands-on training for handling low-frequency, high-risk patients with life-threatening airway issues.

ER and ICU nursing staff were tasked with recognizing and stabilizing a patient's airway while awaiting additional help to arrive (such as an airway provider, respiratory therapist, or doctor). During the scenario, staff were challenged with finding puzzle pieces that were attached to supplies, equipment in the room, and on the unit that would help them stabilize the patient. Nurses and nursing assistants from both units participated in mixed group sessions.

Debriefing sessions covered topics such as worst-case scenarios specific to VABHHCS, current evidence-based practices for airway management, and nursing charting responsibilities. Additionally, the Respiratory Therapy (RT) department staff provided insights from their perspective on airway emergencies, ventilator management, and troubleshooting.



Nurses at VA Black Hills Healthcare System participate in high-risk airway management simulation exercise. Left to right: Heidi Matthew, RN; Nicole Ackerman, Paramedic; Joanna Danielson, RN; Lindsay Dunlop, RN. Photographer: Kayla Cooper, RN

The theme of "putting the pieces together" facilitated learning and sparked valuable discussions during the debrief. When a few groups didn't find all the pieces, educators and staff related these instances to real world scenarios and the resulting challenges that can arise. The primary goal was to recognize the bigger picture, which in this case was the patient's airway. The nursing staff reported feeling confident in caring for patients with compromised airways, but they acknowledged the discomfort of not knowing the exact location of equipment.

Participants were given time to ask questions and familiarize themselves with the equipment used during the simulation. One post-simulation survey participant noted, "The interaction with the team helped me

recall where the equipment is during a stressful situation... I liked the puzzle pieces as they gave me clues to what I was forgetting instead of feeling lost." Staff members appreciated the preparedness and awareness practice for worst-case scenarios, which further strengthened the exceptional care they provide at VABHHCS.

This simulation event required seamless collaboration among unit managers, ICU and ER staff, the RT department, physicians, pharmacists, and education specialists. With meticulous schedule coordination by unit managers, all but one staff member participated in the event, which directly contributes to a more close-knit VHA simulation community.