Facilitating the Interfacility Transfer of Emergency Care Patients

Description

Emergency nurses are often called upon to facilitate interfacility transfers of emergency care patients requiring treatment at a different healthcare delivery site. Interfacility transfer — movement of a patient from a primary care facility to a hospital with the capability and resources for definitive care — may present a potential safety risk to patient and staff. Optimally, specialized transport teams provide interfacility transfers for patients requiring the highest levels of care. Risks associated with transport include clinical deterioration, adverse events, errors in care, inadequate numbers of healthcare workers to provide complex emergency care, transport delays, miscommunication, and crashes during transport. Singh et al. studied 5,144 surface interfacility transfers and found critical events occurred “in 333 (6.5%) of all transports, or 1 critical event for every 11.6 hours of transport time” (p. 11). Data are inconclusive regarding the risks and benefits of transferring critically ill, intubated, or ventilated patients. It is clear, however, that optimal patient outcomes are achieved when pediatric and trauma patient populations are cared for at the facilities best prepared to address their needs. Thus, the decision to transfer includes a determination of risks versus benefits. The use of hospital policies, protocols, staff education and training, physician direction, and written transfer agreements integrating Emergency Medical Treatment and Active Labor Act (EMTALA) regulations have been demonstrated to help mitigate the risks associated with transfers. Additional considerations are related to patient acuity, care level needed (e.g., private vehicle, basic life support, advanced life support, specialty care transport, etc.), estimated transport and arrival times, costs, community impact, patient preference, and health policy (e.g., state and federal regulations).

ENA Position

It is the position of the Emergency Nurses Association that:

1. Emergency nurses advocate for and facilitate interfacility transfers to promote patient well-being and optimal patient outcomes.
2. Emergency nurses know and adhere to federal, regional, and hospital regulations mandating a medical screening exam (MSE), patient stabilization within the capability of the facility, and patient consent.
3. Interfacility transfers are accomplished by qualified, competent personnel, oriented to the transport environment, using appropriate equipment and medical control.
4. Transfer protocols and interfacility agreements are in place to achieve a systematically acceptable, safe process.
5. Patient safety and the requisite level of care are maintained throughout the interfacility transfer.
6. Emergency nurses actively engage in policy development specifically for interfacility transfer.
7. Emergency nurses advocate for further research and collaborate with Emergency Medical Services to examine transfer risks and identify improved patient-care strategies.

Background

Interfacility transport is necessary to move critically ill or injured patients and those requiring specialty care to a facility where specialized healthcare services are available. Providing clinical care commensurate with the needs of patients during transfer is crucial for risk reduction. However, the composition of interfacility transport teams can vary across regions because of differences in state regulations. Teams may include any combination of emergency medical technicians,
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paramedics, registered nurses, respiratory therapists, advanced practice nurses, and physicians, and this may contribute to the risk for patients during interfacility transport.

Thus, it is important that interfacility transfers be performed by teams with the requisite training to manage patients in out-of-hospital environments. This may necessitate additional or advanced education to assist or cover for other providers during a transfer. In some instances, interfacility transfer of patients by ambulance necessitates that an emergency nurse accompany an emergency medical services team to provide patient care.

Recommended education to prepare emergency nurses to accompany patients during interfacility transports by ambulance includes: relevant Advanced Life Support (ALS) courses, Trauma Nursing Core Course (TNCC), and Emergency Nursing Pediatric Course (ENPC). Educational content related to the Certified Transport Registered Nurse (CTRN) also may help provide the emergency nurse with the specific knowledge for safe, efficient, and effective patient care during an ambulance interfacility transport.

Resources


References


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This Position Statement replaces Interfacility Transfer (9/2010).

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