Current preoperative marking practice by UK ophthalmologists

In Patient Safety Alert 6, The National Patient Safety Agency (NPSA) stated that “across the NHS, there is no single standard method for marking a surgical site, which increases the likelihood of confusion and error. Despite high professional standards and excellent best practice at a local level, safety can be improved by using a consistent national standard for preoperative marking and a verification checklist.”

The deadline for consideration/implementation of these NPSA guidelines (or a robust local alternative) was 16 March 2005. We attempted to ascertain to what extent standardisation in preoperative marking exists within ophthalmology by surveying a sample of UK consultant ophthalmologists in March 2006.

Questionnaires were sent to consultants in randomly chosen geographical regions. The first part of the questionnaire asked how frequently patients were marked for each operation from a list of common eye procedures. The second part asked which methods were used to identify and confirm patient, procedure and site before surgery. The final section asked for common reasons for not marking patients. Replies were anonymous.

We obtained 145 replies from 205 questionnaires (response rate 71%). For cataract surgery, 99 (76%) respondents always marked patients and 26 (20%) rarely or never did. Marking was more likely for eye removal procedures than corneal surgery, 99 (76%) respondents always marked patients and 26 (20%) rarely or never did. Marking was more likely for eye removal procedures than corneal surgery, 99 (76%) respondents always marked patients and 26 (20%) rarely or never did. Marking was more likely for eye removal procedures than corneal surgery, 99 (76%) respondents always marked patients and 26 (20%) rarely or never did. Marking was more likely for eye removal procedures than corneal surgery, 99 (76%) respondents always marked patients and 26 (20%) rarely or never did. When marking was performed, 96 respondents (67%) used an identification band or relied on the operating list or handover from other staff. There was variability in marking patients with regard to the number and types of checks, although nearly all either always marked patients themselves or satisfied themselves otherwise that details were correct before starting surgery (and took pains to make this clear on the questionnaire).

Generally, the survey suggests a degree of variability in marking and preoperative checking. The variability between different units could be due to local “robust systems”, but this is less likely when one looks at the variability within each unit. Although wrong site surgery is uncommon, it does happen, and consequences may range from minimal to devastating. These thoughts are not entirely preventable. Marking all patients will not eliminate this risk—there is always scope for human error. However, it seems logical that standardisation of preoperative marking and checking as suggested by the NPSA would reduce the occurrence of this complication. For a practitioner to know that whichever specialty, region or trust they are working in, the same systems are employed, should reduce at least one avenue of potential error.

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References

Corrections


The journal apologises for an error that has occurred within this letter, where the text following the second equation ($\sigma_n = \ldots$) should read as follows:

$$N \sim \text{normal}(\mu, \sigma^2)$$

where $N$ is the sum of $n_i$ and $\sigma$ is the standard deviation of $\mu$. The 3-sigma control limits for Lancy’s $p$-chart are thus given by $\bar{p} \pm 3\sigma$, thereby accounting for within and between hospital variations.


A correction is required in this paper on page 369, in the third paragraph of the introduction, where the first sentence should read as follows:

Although no specific incidents of retained surgical items have been reported as part of current patient safety programmes in the UK\textsuperscript{13} the reporting of sentinel events is mandatory for public hospitals in Australian states.\textsuperscript{14} 15

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CORRECTIONS

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