Incidence of medication errors and adverse drug events in the ICU: a systematic review

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ABSTRACT
Background Medication errors (MEs) and adverse drug events (ADEs) are both common and under-reported in the intensive care setting. The definitions of these terms vary substantially in the literature. Many methods have been used to estimate their incidence.

Methods A systematic review was done to assess methods used for tracking unintended drug events in intensive care units (ICUs). Studies published up to 22 June 2007 were identified by searching eight online databases, including Medline. In total, 613 studies were evaluated for inclusion by two reviewers.

Results The authors selected 29 papers to analyse; all studies took place in an ICU, were reproducible and reported ICU-specific rates of events. Rates of MEs varied from 8.1 to 2344 per 1000 patient-days, and ADEs from 5.1 to 87.5 per 1000 patient-days. The definitions of ADE and ME in the studies varied widely.

Conclusions Much variation exists in reported rates and definitions of ADEs and MEs in ICUs. Some of this variation may be due to a lack of standard definitions for ADEs and MEs, and methods for detecting them. Further standardisation is needed before these methods can be used to evaluate process improvements.

INTRODUCTION
The rate of medication errors (MEs) and adverse drug events (ADEs) for patients admitted to the intensive care unit (ICU) is greater than that for patients admitted to general medical wards for several reasons. First, ICU patients receive more medications than patients on other hospital wards. Second, most medications in the ICU are given intravenously, and calculation of infusion rates is often required; both of these characteristics may create more opportunities for error. Third, most patients in the ICU are sedated and are therefore unable to identify potential errors themselves. Fourth, patients in the ICU have limited physiological reserve, potentially increasing risks of harm from medication-related errors. It is thus important to have methods to accurately measure rates of MEs and ADEs in the ICU.

The Institute of Medicine (IOM) provides definitions for MEs and ADEs. MEs are any errors occurring in the medication-use process. Examples of this are wrong dosage prescribed or wrong dosage administered. An ADE refers to any injury due to a medication. Although ADEs are often caused by errors, this term does not necessarily mean that an error occurred; an example of this is a patient in whom an allergic reaction to a drug occurred who was not known to have any allergies. A preventable ADE occurs when an ADE results from a preventable ME (ie, any error in the prescribing or transcribing of a medication order, or in the dispensing, administration or monitoring of a medication).

Many different definitions and methods for tracking MEs or ADEs have been used in the ICU setting. The purpose of our study was to systematically review the published literature regarding MEs and ADEs that occur in the ICU, specifically highlighting the differences in event rates as a function of the terms used to define events and the techniques used for detection.

METHODS

For the Medline search, we used the following strategy: MeSH terms ‘intensive care units’ and ‘intensive care’ and multipurpose words ‘intensive care’ and ‘icu$’ were used. To identify a wide range of methods for collection of MEs, MeSH terms ‘medication errors’ and ‘adverse drug reaction reporting systems’ were used. Also, multipurpose terms ‘((medication or drug or prescrip$) adj2 (error$ or mistake$))’, ‘(incident$ or voluntary$) adj2 report$’ and ‘adverse drug event$’ were used. The ultimate search strategy was the union of ICU terms and the ME terms. The search was restricted to articles published in English. Comparable searches were run in the other databases.

Inclusion/exclusion criteria To be included, studies had to take place in an ICU, have original data, describe a method of measuring MEs or ADEs, include a rate of ME or ADE occurrence, and have sufficiently detailed methods so that the study could be replicated. Articles were excluded if they did not provide numerical ME or ADE rates, or if the rates provided were pooled with wards other than the ICU. We also excluded abstracts from conferences, letters, comments, opinion pieces and editorials.

All abstracts were reviewed by two investigators (AW and KL). Full manuscripts of any potentially eligible studies were obtained. Any disagreements in each round were resolved by discussion between the two reviewers and evaluation by the senior authors (PD and NA) as necessary.
**Data abstraction**

Study data were grouped by the methods used to detect MEs or ADEs. Voluntary reporting systems involved ICU staff using a paper or computer-based system to provide details of a potential or actual unintended medication events. Prescription review involved a pharmacist reviewing medication orders and documenting errors found. Observational techniques involved a trained observer following a prescription for some portion of the process from when it was written to its administration to examine the process for errors. Trigger tools involved a review of patient records, with either chart review or computer programs for evidence of indications of ADEs such as antidote use, or electrolyte abnormalities that could be due to medications. Multifaceted methods combined several of the aforementioned techniques.

Information was collected on the type of ICU studied, the country in which the study took place, the type of hospital (academic vs community), the number of centres involved, the definition of events measured, the methods used to detect events and the event rates detected.

In studies involving more than one ICU or where a pre-post design was used, weighted averages were calculated for each individual study when possible to provide a single rate of MEs or ADEs per 1000 patient-days. This was done by multiplying the rate for each separate group by the fraction of the total number of patient-days examined in that group. The rates were then added together to obtain an overall weighted average. Studies with the same units of measurement (eg, ADE/1000 patient-days) were grouped together for comparison.

**RESULTS**

The initial literature search yielded 613 abstracts. After review of these abstracts, 174 full articles were obtained. Forty-five articles were excluded because they did not have original data, 37 because they did not report relevant outcomes, 14 because the severity of the events was not reported, four because results combined ICU and non-ICU specific data, four because the methods did not provide enough information to replicate the study and 41 for two or more of the above reasons. In the end, 29 articles remained for analysis.

All of the studies came from first-world countries, and most (24/29) took place in an academic tertiary care hospital (table 1). Specifics of the durations of studies, countries of origin, types of ICUs and methods of study are summarised in table 1.

The studies were grouped by the outcome reported (eg, ADEs, preventable ADEs) as shown in tables 2–5. The predominant methods of event detection in the studies were prescription review (n=7) and multifaceted techniques (n=5), followed by observational techniques (n=6), voluntary reporting (n=5), trigger tools (n=3) and comparison of two of the previously mentioned methods (n=1). The majority of these studies had different definitions of the events being measured. There was substantial variability in event rates, regardless of the specific outcome; in general, there was a one to two order of magnitude difference in rates across studies even when the same type of event was reported. For instance, the range of ADE/1000 patient-days ranged from 2.4 to 87.5 (table 2).

Not unexpectedly, MEs were more common than ADEs, and more events were identified when multifaceted methods of detection were used.

**DISCUSSION**

We found a wide variation in reported rates of medication-related events. We believe that much of this large variability was due to differences in: (1) definitions of the same type of event and (2) methods used to detect events.

**MEs compared with ADEs**

MEs include any error from prescribing through to administration and monitoring of a drug but which do not necessarily cause harm. Conversely, ADEs indicate that patient harm has occurred. Because most MEs do not result in harm, it is logical that MEs are more frequent than ADEs. To illustrate this, Rothschild et al found the rate of MEs to be 129.5/1000 patient-days, while the rate of ADEs was only 37.6/1000 patient-days.

Although MEs do not lead to harm in many cases, they provide the unique opportunity to identify the need for system changes, which have the potential to prevent harm to patients. Measuring ADE rates is also useful, since this identifies actual situations in which patients are harmed and also allows for change for safer policies.

**Variability in definitions of events**

Another reason for variability among the studies was the diversity of definitions used for the same type of event. For example, 14 studies included in this paper reported MEs per 1000 patient-days as an outcome (table 3). Two of these studies provided no definitions for this term, while 12 of the other studies each used a different definition. Some studies focused on only one aspect of the medication process (eg, prescribing or administration), while others focused on all aspects. Nevertheless, even in the 10 studies that looked at all aspects of the process, there was still substantial variation in the definitions of MEs among these studies (table 3).

Some authors defined MEs similar to how we have done (errors in drug prescribing, transcription, dispensing, administration and monitoring), while other authors provided more vague definitions such as ‘potential or
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reference</th>
<th>Type of ICUs</th>
<th>Method of study</th>
<th>Description of method</th>
<th>Definition of ADE</th>
<th>ADEs/1000 patient-days</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>MICU, SICU</td>
<td>Trigger tool</td>
<td>ADEs were identified by extraction from the ADE programme database, retrospective</td>
<td>Injury resulting from drug treatment</td>
<td>2.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>screening of ICD codes and reviewing antidote use and potentially drug-related electrolyte disturbances</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Not specified</td>
<td>Trigger tool</td>
<td>Charts were chosen randomly, and IHI trigger tool was applied using predesigned data collection forms. Charts were reviewed for 20 min, and if a trigger was detected only the portion of the chart relevant to it was reviewed. Severity of the adverse events was classified.</td>
<td>Medication related adverse event</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>SICU</td>
<td>Prescription review</td>
<td>The ICU pharmacist analysed every medication order of randomly selected patients during study period.</td>
<td>Medication prescribing errors that cause harm to patient</td>
<td>87.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>2 MICU, 3 SICU</td>
<td>Multifaceted</td>
<td>Nurses and pharmacists were asked to report incidents using logs. A trained nurse visited each unit at least twice daily on weekdays and solicited information from staff concerning all actual or potential drug related incidents. A study nurse briefly reviewed all charts at least daily on weekdays.</td>
<td>A preventable injury resulting from medical intervention related to a drug</td>
<td>5.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>2 CSICU, 2 CS stepdown unit</td>
<td>Multifaceted</td>
<td>Pump-related transaction data were obtained from smart pump log downloads. Log reports included pump alerts. In addition, error reports were collected by chart review, solicited staff reports, hospital incident reports and a computerised ADE surveillance monitor.</td>
<td>Injury due to a medication</td>
<td>6.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>2 MICU, 3 SICU</td>
<td>Multifaceted</td>
<td>Nurses and pharmacists were asked to report incidents using logs. A trained nurse visited each unit at least twice daily on weekdays and solicited information from staff concerning all actual or potential drug related incidents. A study nurse briefly reviewed all charts at least daily on weekdays.</td>
<td>Injury resulting from medical intervention related to a drug</td>
<td>14.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>MICU, CCU</td>
<td>Multifaceted</td>
<td>Two investigators identified incidents by review of medical records in which they examined all progress notes, orders and lab results. Pharmacist interventions were also tracked on a form.</td>
<td>Injury related to use of a medication</td>
<td>29.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>CCU</td>
<td>Multifaceted</td>
<td>Nurses and pharmacists were asked to report incidents using logs. A trained nurse visited each unit at least twice daily on weekdays and solicited information from staff concerning all actual or potential drug related incidents. A study nurse briefly reviewed all charts at least daily on weekdays.</td>
<td>An injury resulting from the administration of a drug</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>MICU, CCU</td>
<td>Multifaceted</td>
<td>Primary method of data collection was direct continuous observation. Voluntary and solicited reports were also used to identify incidents. Computerised ADE detection was also used to monitor events. Also, guided chart abstraction by trained research nurses was performed.</td>
<td>Any injury due to medical management, rather than the underlying disease</td>
<td>37.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>PADE definition</td>
<td>PADEs/1000 patient-days</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>2 MICU, 3 SICU</td>
<td>Multifaceted</td>
<td>Nurses and pharmacists were asked to report incidents using logs, a trained nurse visited each unit at least twice daily on weekdays and solicited information from staff concerning all actual or potential drug related incidents, and a study nurse briefly reviewed all charts at least daily on weekdays.</td>
<td>Incident with a potential for injury related to a drug</td>
<td>13.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>2 CSICU, 2 cardiac surgery stepdown unit</td>
<td>Multifaceted</td>
<td>Pump-related transaction data were obtained from smart pump log downloads. Log reports included pump alerts. In addition, error reports were collected by chart review, solicited staff reports, hospital incident reports and a computerised ADE surveillance monitor.</td>
<td>ME that had the potential to cause harm but did not because it either was intercepted before reaching the patient or reached the patient and because of luck did not cause harm</td>
<td>23.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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Table 2 Continued

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reference</th>
<th>Type of ICUs</th>
<th>Method of study</th>
<th>Description of method</th>
<th>Definition of ADE</th>
<th>ADEs/1000 patient-days</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>Surgical/trauma ICU</td>
<td>Trigger tool</td>
<td>All patients admitted during a 3-month period were monitored for abnormalities in their potassium, magnesium, liver enzymes, blood glucose, serum creatinine and platelet count. Once identified, they were categorised as possibly, probably or definitely caused by a drug used in the patient. They were also classified in terms of severity on a scale from no change in outcome to death.</td>
<td>Drug-related hazardous condition: a biochemical response to a drug that has the potential to cause clinical injury</td>
<td>47 DRHCs/1000 patient-days</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>Mixed PICU</td>
<td>Observation of entire medication process</td>
<td>One nurse was picked randomly at the start of each shift and followed to observe prescriptions from writing to administration</td>
<td>Not provided</td>
<td>3.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>Mixed ICU</td>
<td>Observation of entire medication process</td>
<td>Two pharmacy residents recorded activities related to medication use process using standardised data collection sheets. The observers followed the entire medication process from prescription writing to administration.</td>
<td>An injury or patient harm occurring as the result of a medication intervention; can be preventable or non-preventable</td>
<td>4.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

CCU, critical care unit; CSCI, cardiac surgery intensive-care unit; ICU, intensive care unit; ME, medication error; MICU, medical intensive care unit; PICU, paediatric intensive care unit; SICU, surgical intensive care unit.

preventable ADEs’ or ‘all events where treatment or observation differed from a planned one’.1 10

ADE was used as an outcome in 11 studies (table 2).1 5–12 14 15 Although one study did not provide a definition for this term,14 nearly all the others had a common theme—patient injury. Nine of these definitions defined ADE as injury or harm caused by a medication, while one gave a vague definition of ‘medication-related adverse event’.15 Overall the concept of ADE among studies was more consistent than that for MEs. Nevertheless, it would still be useful to have a standard definition for an ADE, as this would likely reduce the substantial variability in rates among studies.

The reason for this diversity of definitions is likely related to that fact that no standard definition is accepted by all the major organisations related to medication safety. For example, the IOM definition of ME is different from that of the National Coordinating Council for Medication Error Reporting and Prevention, while the Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality does not provide a definition for this term. Standardisation of definitions between these important groups would likely set a precedent for researchers in this area. The IOM definitions were used most commonly in papers included in this study, perhaps suggesting they may be accepted more readily by the research community.

Variability in methods of detecting events

In general, multifaceted methods for measuring events were associated with higher rates of event detection. However, when studies using multifaceted methods were compared, substantial differences in ME rates were found, varying from 18.6 to 146.1 per 1000 patient-days.1 8 12 16 The studies which reported 18.6 and 22.1 MEs per 1000 patient-days did not include observation, whereas the studies that reported 129.5 and 146.1 MEs per 1000 patient-days included observation methods.1 8 12 16 The study by Rothschild et al reported 129.5 MEs/1000 patient-days, but only 37.6 ADEs/1000 patient-days, suggesting that the addition of observation may increase the sensitivity of detecting errors, but is not associated with an increased detection of harm.12

For ADEs, rates in these studies ranged from 5.1 to 37.6 ADEs per 1000 patient-days.1 8–12 Three of these studies used similar methods, involving voluntary and solicited incident reporting and daily chart review during weekdays.1 9 11 Despite this commonality, rates were 5.1, 14.4 and 33 ADEs per 1000 patient-days.1 9 11 The study which reported 5.1 ADEs/1000 patient-days included only preventable events, whereas the other two studies included all events that caused patient harm.1 The reason for variation between the latter two studies may be partly because the studies were done in different types of ICUs.5 11 The fourth study by Rothschild et al that reported 37.6 ADEs/1000 patient-days incorporated direct continuous observation into their methods, in addition to voluntary and solicited incident reporting and daily chart review during weekdays.12 This difference in methods used to detect adverse events likely accounts for the higher detection rate of the latter study.

Substantial variation in event rates was also seen with voluntary reporting methods. Reasons for this variation include the anonymity of reporting, the hospital safety culture, the staff education on incident reporting and the presence of a non-punitive policy related to reporting. In six studies using voluntary reporting, which measured MEs/1000 patient-days, all reported having non-punitive incident reporting systems, and four out of these six papers described educational programmes for staff and strategies to encourage staff to report incidents.17–22 The error rates in these studies still ranged from 8.8 to 241 MEs/1000 patient-days.17–22 Paradoxically, the study that reported 241 MEs/1000 patient-days did not describe any intervention to encourage reporting, while the study that reported 8.8 MEs/1000 patient-days described a strategy to encourage staff to report even trivial incidents.17 22 This paradox was likely related to the difference in terms used to define events. In the study reporting 8.8 MEs/1000 patient-days, the definition of ME was specific (ie, a dose of medication that deviates from the physician’s orders which reaches the patient).17 Conversely, in the study reporting 241 MEs/1000 patient-days, ME was defined much more broadly as a ‘mistake made at any stage of the provision of a pharmaceutical product to a patient’.22 Observation techniques involve study personnel watching nurses prepare and administer medications and recording any discrepancies from what is ordered in the patient’s chart. The rates of observed errors in medication preparation and
## Table 3  Description of studies that presented rates of medication errors (MEs) per 1000 patient-days

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reference</th>
<th>Type of ICU</th>
<th>Method of study</th>
<th>Definition of ME</th>
<th>MEs/1000 patient-days</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>2 MICU, 3 SICU</td>
<td>Multifaceted</td>
<td>Nurses and pharmacists were asked to report incidents using logs, a trained nurse visited each unit at least twice daily on weekdays and solicited information from staff concerning all actual or potential drug-related incidents, and a study nurse briefly reviewed all charts at least daily on weekdays</td>
<td>Preventable and potential ADEs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>2 CSICU, 2 CS stepdown unit</td>
<td>Multifaceted</td>
<td>Pump-related transaction data were obtained from smart pump log downloads. Log reports included pump alerts. In addition, error reports were collected by chart review, solicited staff reports, hospital incident reports and a computerised ADE surveillance monitor.</td>
<td>Errors during ordering, transcribing, dispensing, administering or monitoring. These errors have the capacity to cause injury and reach the patient.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>MICU, CCU</td>
<td>Multifaceted</td>
<td>Primary method of data collection was direct continuous observation. Voluntary and solicited reports were also used to identify incidents. Computerised ADE detection was also used to monitor events. Also, guided chart abstraction by trained research nurses was performed.</td>
<td>ME in ordering or execution of treatment, inadequate monitoring system or medication related failure to take precautions or follow protocol to prevent accidental injury</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>MICU, CCU</td>
<td>Multifaceted</td>
<td>A team of two nurse chart reviewers and six physician observers collected data on errors made by interns, which was supplemented by voluntary reports and a computerised event-detection monitor.</td>
<td>An ME that causes harm, or has the potential to cause harm, related to the ordering or administration of pharmaceutical agents, blood products or intravenous fluids</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>NICU, PICU</td>
<td>Voluntary reporting</td>
<td>Written incident reports were submitted by persons who noticed the errors. All incident reports are reviewed anonymously by a pharmacy manager and possible corrective measures are discussed in monthly quality assurance meetings. The non-punitive nature of the review is emphasised, and ICU personnel are encouraged to send reports even when errors seem trivial. Patient injuries are classified on a 1–4 severity scale.</td>
<td>A dose of medication that deviates from the physicians’ order as written in the medical record. Except for errors of omission, the medication dose must actually reach the patient to be considered an error.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>Mixed ICU</td>
<td>Voluntary reporting</td>
<td>An incident registration form was developed without any patient ID except for sex and age. The person reporting was allowed to remain anonymous but the professional status was requested. The seriousness of the errors was evaluated by four ICU staff members. Prior to starting the reporting process, staff were informed of incident reporting during meetings and with the internal newsletter. They were asked to report errors no matter how small.</td>
<td>All events when treatment or observation differed from a planned one, and when this was not a part of the natural course of the disease</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>NICU</td>
<td>Voluntary reporting</td>
<td>Errors were identified using critical incident forms. The forms were analysed monthly by a multidisciplinary risk management group and graded according to severity. Non-punitive system.</td>
<td>Not provided</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>MICU</td>
<td>Voluntary reporting</td>
<td>A locally developed, card-based reporting programme available to hospital physicians and staff. The SAFE card solicited core info about patient safety events and could be anonymous if desired. The intervention involved encouraging the non-punitive nature of the programme and open communication about safety.</td>
<td>Not provided</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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### Table 3 Continued

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reference</th>
<th>Type of ICU</th>
<th>Method of study</th>
<th>Definition of ME</th>
<th>MEs/1000 patient-days</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>21</td>
<td>2 multidisciplinary ICUs</td>
<td>Voluntary reporting</td>
<td>The research team attempted to familiarise the staff with the concept of incident reporting, and to describe the non-punitive nature of the study. The incident reporting form requested the location, reporter’s profession, type of unintended event, severity of unintended event and the time of day it was detected.</td>
<td>Event that reduce or could have reduced the safety margin for the patient while in the ICU. Specifically, prescription error, transcription error, wrong dose and wrong route of administration.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22</td>
<td>Paediatric cardiac ICU</td>
<td>Voluntary reporting</td>
<td>ME report forms were filled out and analysed. Info collected: profession of reporter, location of event, type of error (supply, administration, prescription), details of event, including clinical consequences. Anonymous. Non-punitive.</td>
<td>A mistake made at any stage of in the provision of a pharmaceutical product to a patient</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23</td>
<td>ICU, PICU, NICU</td>
<td>Prescription review</td>
<td>Pharmacists reviewed prescriptions for therapy and prescription errors, and filled out a standardised form when they were found, which categorised their actions in response to the error, and the clinical significance of the error</td>
<td>Therapy errors—incorrect choice of drugs for a defined disease, incorrect drug because of similarity in name or interactions between drugs, prescription errors—incorrect dosage, route, frequency, patient, or length of treatment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24</td>
<td>Multidisciplinary ICU</td>
<td>Prescription review</td>
<td>A pharmacist reviewed the nursing MAR for the previous 24 h period and compared it with the physician’s orders in the patients chart and recorded all doses on a patient data collection sheet. The patient’s TISS score was available for the exact date/time of error, as were ICU deaths.</td>
<td>Drug administered to wrong patient, wrong dose, wrong medication, wrong route of administration, wrong time, patient has allergy to prescribed medication, omission of a medication, error in infusion rate, improper administration and administration of the wrong dosage form</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>SICU</td>
<td>Prescription review</td>
<td>ICU pharmacist analysed every medication order of randomly selected patients during study period. An independent panel evaluated the severity of the events.</td>
<td>Medication prescribing errors: minor—no potential to cause harm intercepted—potential to cause harm but intercepted in time serious-non-intercepted potential ADEs (potential to cause harm)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25</td>
<td>MICU</td>
<td>Observation of medication administration</td>
<td>Pharmacy residents observed nurses’ administration of medications. The nurses knew the purpose of the study. The length of observation was 5 h/day, during the heaviest period of medication preparation/administration. All observations were noted, then later compared with original physicians’ orders, manufacturers’ data and data available in the literature. Potential clinical significance was evaluated by an ICU physician.</td>
<td>Wrong drug preparation, dose error, wrong administration technique, physicochemical compatibility error</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21</td>
<td>2 multidisciplinary ICUs</td>
<td>Observation of entire medication process</td>
<td>Two medical residents acted as observers. They filled out standard form during morning shifts for 14 days. The form requested the location, reporter’s profession, type of unintended event, severity of unintended event and the time of day it was detected. The staff were unaware of the observation.</td>
<td>Event that reduce or could have reduced the safety margin for the patient while in the ICU. Specifically: problems with medications: prescription error, transcription error, wrong dose, wrong route of administration</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

ADE, adverse drug event; ICU, intensive care unit; MAR, Medication Administration Record; SAFE, Safety, Actions, Focus Everyone; TISS, Therapeutic Intervention Scoring System.
Studies that used prescription review showed that 2.2—11.2% of orders were associated with a ME (table 5).24 29–31 All methods involved pharmacists reviewing prescriptions and recording errors identified. Studies that reported lower error rates (2.2, 5.4, 5.9%) provided specific definitions of MEs, whereas the study by Ridley et al., reporting 11.2%, used a more vague definition of ‘prescriptions which did not follow standards given by the British National Formulary’.24 29–31 When ME rates were reviewed, they were 8.2, 497.5 and 2344 per 1000 patient-days for the three prescription review studies that reported these data.7 23 24 The methods used in two out of three studies were similar.7 23 The other study involved a pharmacist reviewing the medication administration record for the past 24 h and comparing it with doctors’ orders.24 This difference, as well as the inconsistency in the definition of ME (table 5), may have contributed to the observed variation in rates.

**Recommendations for methods of tracking MEs and ADEs**
The IOM currently recommends different means of monitoring ADEs or MEs depending on what the institution hopes to achieve from the measurements.3 The recommendations are not specific for ICUs. If the institution wishes to track errors resulting in
ADEs, chart review, voluntary and prompted self-report systems, and computer-generated ADE tracking are key recommendations. However, if the institution wishes to detect as many errors as possible in order to identify system problems to be fixed, observation, in addition to chart review and voluntary and prompted self-report, is recommended. Although advantages and disadvantages of each method are discussed, no gold standard is presented as the best method for tracking MEs or ADEs.

Our study confirmed that observation methods are very sensitive for detecting MEs and would be useful for the reasons noted above. We found that multifaceted techniques seemed to provide the most consistent tracking of ADEs, perhaps due to their rigorous nature of study. If the institution has the resources available to implement this type of approach, it seems quite useful in identifying errors associated with patient harm.

Utility of this study

The variability in error rates that we have observed in this review likely far outweighs the actual variation in MEs among ICUs. A recent review by Moyen et al confirms the frequency and severity of errors in the ICU, and confirms the importance of identifying system failures leading to MEs, so that these systems can be redesigned for improvement of patient outcomes. For this to occur reliably, standard definitions of MEs and ADEs must be adopted, and the methods for measuring rates of errors and adverse events should become standardised. These changes are also important in benchmarking these rates among different ICUs. There is a trend towards pay for performance healthcare currently; benchmarking may facilitate financial benefits for certain institutions if they have low event rates. All these reasons support the urgency to develop means for standardised reporting of MEs and ADEs.

CONCLUSION

There is wide variation in the definitions and rates of MEs and ADEs in ICUs, and in the methods used to detect them. Review of the literature showed that the ADE had a more reproducible definition than ME, as ADE denotes patient harm, while the interpretation of an ME can vary widely. Further standardisation of outcome definitions and methods of detecting errors must be done before the best methods for tracking ICU MEs and ADEs can be established.

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Competing interests

None.

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