

September 4, 2008

## Implementing Standardized Colors for Patient Alert Wristbands

### AT A GLANCE

#### **The Issue:**

America's hospitals are committed to delivering safe care. To alert caregivers to certain patient risks, many facilities use color-coded patient wristbands. However, if hospitals use different colors for these alerts, caregivers working in more than one facility may have difficulty always responding in the appropriate manner. Standardizing the colors of the wristbands used in hospitals is the sensible approach to improving patient safety, and many state hospital associations have already engaged their hospitals in this effort. As the national advocate for America's hospitals, the AHA is asking all hospitals to consider using three standardized colors for alert wristbands. The colors, which have been adopted as a consensus in numerous states, are: red for patient allergies; yellow for a fall risk; and purple for do-not-resuscitate patient preferences.

#### **What You Can Do:**

- ✓ Share this advisory with your senior managers, quality improvement team, communications team, purchasing department and other key staff, including physicians, nurses and other caregivers.
- ✓ Review your own practices for the use of colored alert wristbands.
- ✓ Begin to think about how your hospital would adopt the standardized wristband colors, if you use other colors for these alerts.
- ✓ Sign up to attend an AHA member call on this topic either **Friday, September 19<sup>th</sup>** or **Tuesday, September 23<sup>rd</sup>** by [clicking here](#).
- ✓ Download additional information about standardizing alert wristband colors from the AHA Quality Center Web site at:  
<http://www.ahaqualitycenter.org/ahaqualitycenter/jsp/home.jsp>.

#### **Further Questions:**

Contact Beth Feldpush, senior associate director for policy, at (202) 626-2963 or [bfeldpush@aha.org](mailto:bfeldpush@aha.org).

## Implementing Standardized Colors for Patient Alert Wristbands

### **BACKGROUND**

Hospitals use color-coded wristbands to alert or quickly communicate a certain health care condition that a patient may have. Each wristband color has a different meaning; however, not all hospitals may use the same color to convey the same message. A few years ago, a near-miss incident occurred when a nurse mistakenly placed a wrong-colored band on a patient by confusing the practices in the two hospitals where she worked. Although no harm occurred to the patient, the event highlighted an important opportunity to improve patient safety. Since then, many state hospital associations and communities have moved to voluntarily adopt a standardized set of colors that hospitals should use to convey certain medical conditions. To date, more than 25 state hospital associations have provided their hospitals with voluntary guidelines on standardized patient wristband colors.

### **AT ISSUE**

Standardizing the colors that hospitals use to alert staff to certain patient risks is a common-sense approach to improving patient safety. Many physicians and nurses work in multiple hospitals within their communities and even across state lines. In states that have adopted the consensus wristband colors, caregivers have welcomed the standardization and report reduced confusion caused by the numerous previous variations.

This is a sensible action for many hospitals; however, this advisory is not meant to encourage you to begin to use colored alert wristbands if your facility currently does not. Each hospital must make its own determination regarding the use of colored alert wristbands. And, remember, wristbands are merely an alert, and patients' status always should be verified with their charts. Patients' status may change throughout their stay, and it is important to refer to the chart for the most current risk designations.

### ***National Consensus to Adopt Three Colors for Common Condition Alerts***

The AHA is focusing on three condition alerts that have been adopted in consensus by the states that have taken action on this issue. The three alerts and their corresponding standardized colors are:

**RED = ALLERGY**

**YELLOW = FALL RISK**

**PURPLE = DO NOT RESUSCITATE**

#### **Red = Allergy**

Red means stop. Caregivers will be alerted to stop and check the medical record to see if the patient is allergic to the medication, food or treatment he or she is about to receive.

#### **Yellow = Fall risk**

Yellow is a warning to slow down, pay attention and take special precautions. Nurses review patients all the time to determine if they need extra attention to prevent a fall. Sometimes a person may become weakened during an illness or because of surgery. When a patient has this colored alert wristband, it says that this person needs to be assisted when walking or transferring to help prevent a fall.

#### **Purple = Do not resuscitate**

Some patients have expressed an end-of-life wish that they would like honored in the event of a cardiac arrest. When a patient is wearing a purple wristband, it alerts the hospital staff to check the patient record for important information on patient end-of-life directives.

### ***Suggested Risk Reduction Strategies***

The following strategies should be considered to further reduce the risk of adverse events related to colored alert wristbands.

- **Clearly define which staff are responsible for the initial assessment and subsequent reassessments that may determine whether a patient has a condition related to one of the alerts.** Colored alert wristbands should be placed on the same extremity as the patient ID band by a nurse or licensed professional and documented in the patient's chart per hospital policy. In the event that a colored alert wristband has to be removed for a treatment or procedure, a nurse should remove the band and then reconfirm the patient risks and replace the band as appropriate immediately following the treatment or procedure.
- **Use wristbands with the alert message pre-printed or embossed on the band.** To minimize confusion, refrain from hand writing anything on the band.

- **If a patient is wearing a “social cause” wristband, the nurse should explain the risks associated with the social cause wristband and ask the patient to remove it.** If the patient refuses, you may request that the patient sign a refusal form acknowledging the risks associated with social cause wristbands.
- **Verify the patient’s risks during hand-offs in care, such as before invasive procedures or during changes in the level of care.** Also, colored alert wristbands should not be removed at discharge. For home discharges, patients are advised to remove the bands at home; for discharges to another facility, the bands are left intact as a safety alert during transfer.

### ***Educating Hospital Staff about the Standardized Colored Alert Wristbands***

Many levels of hospital staff need to thoroughly understand the hospital’s use of colored alert wristbands. For example, a red wristband designating allergies could alert dietary staff to consider whether the patient has food allergies. Environmental services staff, who may be in a patient’s room, could alert the appropriate staff about a potential fall risk if they see a patient with a yellow wristband attempting to get out of bed.

If a hospital adopts the standardized wristband colors, all hospital staff involved in the care process should be educated about the policy. The education process may be formal or informal. Appropriate education and training can encompass unit or department staff meetings, formal education sessions, online modules or annual competencies. Hospitals should consider introducing new staff to hospital policies and procedures related to the use of colored alert wristbands during orientation.

### ***Communicating with Patients and Their Families***

Hospitals want patients and family members to be informed about the care provided in the hospital. Including patients and their family members in the process of using colored alert wristbands will assure a common understanding of what the colored alert wristbands mean, how care is provided when the alert wristbands are worn and the patient’s and the family’s role in correcting any information that contributes to this process. Therefore, designated hospital staff should help patients and their family members understand the meaning of the alert wristbands and the risks associated with wearing social cause wristbands and why these bands should be removed. Patients should be encouraged to notify hospital staff whenever an alert wristband has been removed and not reapplied.

## **NEXT STEPS**

### ***Implementing the Use of Standardized Colored Alert Wristbands***

Many state hospital associations have initiated the standardization of the consensus colors for the hospitals in their states. If your state hospital

association already is engaged, you may want to follow up with their staff on any state-specific suggestions for implementation. If this initiative is new to your hospital, there are several steps you can take to implement the standardized colors in your facility.

- Join the AHA for a one-hour call on either **Friday, September 19<sup>th</sup>** or **Tuesday, September 23<sup>rd</sup>** at **3 pm Eastern (2 pm Central, 1 pm Mountain, 12 pm Pacific)**. The calls will be similar. Please let us know which call you will take part in by [registering here](#). (Direct link to registration site: [http://www.surveymonkey.com/s.aspx?sm=oyGGqoT1z\\_2bEaYbq4u\\_2fmxoQ\\_3d\\_3d](http://www.surveymonkey.com/s.aspx?sm=oyGGqoT1z_2bEaYbq4u_2fmxoQ_3d_3d) ).
- Visit the AHA Quality Center Web site (<http://www.ahaqualitycenter.org/ahaqualitycenter/jsp/home.jsp>) for information on implementing standardized colored wristbands. This site features links to the many existing toolkits and resources developed by state hospital associations.
- Identify a leader within your organization who can spearhead this effort for your facility.
- Begin to determine how you will educate hospital staff about the changes.
- If your facility currently uses these colors to designate other conditions, or uses other colors to designate these conditions, it is recommended that you stop using these colors for about six months before implementing your workplan to standardize to the national consensus colors.

### **Further Questions**

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