Quiet please, drug round in progress
Will ‘do not disturb’ tabards enable nurses to get on with their work or intimidate more timid patients?

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Red ‘do not disturb’ tabards have their place and value when used on a medicines round. They highlight to patients, relatives and other staff that nurses are undertaking an important task that requires their full concentration to ensure the safety of the patients receiving their medicines. Medication errors are unfortunately extremely common. With around 60,000 errors and about 100 deaths and severe harm incidents reported to the National Patient Safety Agency every year, we need systems in place to try to reduce the harm healthcare staff can cause.

However, staff using these red tabards in their clinical areas need to appreciate other factors affecting their implementation. If ward staff are looking after bays of patients, and therefore all administering drugs at the same time, does this mean all staff will be wearing the tabards and cannot be disturbed? Who do people with concerns or queries approach?

Attracting attention
There are also concerns regarding the cleanliness of the tabards: what materials are they made from? Are they easy to clean or launder? Who takes responsibility for this? Some staff say that wearing the tabard can highlight them (rightly or wrongly) as the most senior person on duty, which inevitable attracts queries and interruptions, even if the tabard asks them not to. If wards are using a tabard system, they need to ensure it is clear who is in charge or available when the staff wearing tabards are busy.

Having highlighted the potential complicating factors, we must remember that busy, noisy wards, with countless distracting activities, can contribute to lapses in concentration. Such stimuli overload practitioners and lead to an increased risk of error. Allowing staff time to concentrate on the task in hand is not going to be the entire solution to medication errors, but it may well help.

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