

MEDIA ADVISORY

Jan. 26, 2005

Panel Examines Harmful Communication Gaps in Healthcare System and Provides Prescription for Change

"I applaud the American Association of Critical Care Nurses and VitalSmarts for their leadership in efforts to foster better communication between healthcare professionals as an approach to improving patient safety. This new research and the national standards offered by AACN provides an important framework for creating a culture of collaboration and respect in healthcare settings across the nation."

--Rep. Lois Capps, (D-CA)

"Today's findings underscore the fact that there is an ever-growing body of evidence that doctors, nurses, and other health professionals need be able to share information freely and without fear of litigation or recrimination. We cannot improve the quality of our healthcare system without improving patient safety."

--Senate Majority Leader William H. Frist, M.D.

WHAT:

In a national briefing and Webcast, the American Association of Critical-Care Nurses and VitalSmarts will share findings from the first survey of its kind of physicians, nurses and other healthcare providers to show a link between current gaps in communication among healthcare providers and medical errors. To help address this problem, AACN and VitalSmarts will unveil new national standards and training recommendations to combat the problems currently facing the healthcare industry – namely, medical errors.

WHEN:

Wednesday, January 26
10:00 am EST

WHERE:

The Mayflower Hotel
Senate Room
1127 Connecticut Avenue NW
Washington, DC

WHY:

While there is evidence to suggest that poor communication among providers is a top contributor to medical errors, there has been little research to date examining the specific kinds of communication breakdowns healthcare leaders must address to significantly improve patient safety. AACN and VitalSmarts combined their resources to better understand these communication problems and provide solutions for improving healthcare delivery and patient safety.

WHO:

--Dennis O'Leary, MD, President, Joint Commission on Accreditation of Healthcare Organizations

--Kathleen McCauley, RN, PhD, CS, FAAN, FAHA, President, American Association of Critical-Care Nurses

--Joseph Grenny, President, VitalSmarts

--Karlene M. Kerfoot, RN, PhD, CNAA, FAAN, Senior Vice President, Patient Care Services and Chief Nurse Executive, Clarian Health Partners, Indianapolis, Indiana

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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New Study Finds U.S. Hospitals Must Improve Workplace Communication to Reduce Medical Errors, Enhance Quality of Care

Expert Panel Issues Call-to-Action with
New National Standards and Training Recommendations

WASHINGTON – January 26, 2005 – According to findings from a study released today in a national briefing of healthcare stakeholders, the prevalent culture of poor communication and collaboration among health professionals relates significantly to continued medical errors and staff turnover. Additionally, a lack of adequate support systems, skills and personal accountability results in communication gaps that can cause harm to patients.

A national study of more than 1,700 nurses, physicians, clinical-care staff and administrators found that fewer than 10 percent address behavior by colleagues that routinely includes trouble following directions, poor clinical judgment or taking dangerous shortcuts. In all, the study pinpoints seven categories of problems that are frequently encountered, yet rarely addressed. The study was co-sponsored by the American Association of Critical-Care Nurses (AACN) and VitalSmarts, a company specializing in leadership training and organizational performance.

“This research validates what our 100,000 constituents have communicated to us as the number one barrier hindering optimal care for patients,” said Kathy McCauley, RN, PhD, BC, FAAN, FAHA, president, AACN. “Too often, improving workplace communication is seen as a ‘soft’ issue – the truth is we must build environments that support and demand greater candor among staff if we are to make a demonstrable impact on patient safety.”

To drive the cultural transformation needed to improve communication in hospitals, AACN unveiled today a set of national standards to promote skilled communication and collaboration among nurses and other caregivers. The AACN standards and VitalSmarts recommendations emphasize the urgent need for hospitals to implement initiatives, especially communication training and education, to ensure that healthcare professionals deliver safe, high quality care to their patients.

AACN and VitalSmarts combined their resources to better understand communication problems in hospitals through the survey *Silence Kills: The Seven Crucial Conversations for Healthcare*. Among the study’s key findings:

- **84 percent of physicians and 62 percent of nurses and other clinical-care providers have seen coworkers taking shortcuts that could be dangerous to patients.**
- **88 percent of physicians and 48 percent of nurses and other providers work with people who show poor clinical judgment.**
- **Fewer than 10 percent of physicians, nurses and other clinical staff directly confront their colleagues about their concerns, and one in five physicians said they have seen harm come to patients as a result.**
- **The 10 percent of healthcare workers who raise these crucial concerns observe better patient outcomes, work harder, are more satisfied and are more committed to staying in their jobs.**

“People frequently see these problems, but too often they fail to talk about them,” says Joseph Grenny, president of VitalSmarts and co-author of VitalSmarts’ *New York Times* best-selling books *Crucial Conversations* and *Crucial Confrontations*. “Healthcare professionals who embrace the findings of this study and start talking candidly and safely about these seven problems will find that outcomes can improve dramatically.”

According to panelist Dennis S. O’Leary, MD, president of the Joint Commission on Accreditation of Healthcare Organizations (JCAHO), communication is a top contributor to medical errors in healthcare facilities. “The standards and recommendations put forth today make an important contribution to beginning to solve the identified communication problems,” said Dr. O’Leary.

Panelist Karlene Kerfoot, RN, PhD, CNAA, FAAN, senior vice president for patient care services and chief nurse executive at Clarian Health Partners in Indianapolis, explained that by focusing on workplace communication improvements, Clarian has experienced greater recruitment and retention success and improved safety overall.

“Nurses must be as proficient at handling personal communication as they are in clinical skills,” said Connie Barden, RN, MSN, CCNS, CCRN, executive editor of AACN’s *Standards for Establishing and Sustaining Healthy Work Environments: A Journey to Excellence*. “According to the Standards, a culture of safety and excellence requires that individual nurses and healthcare organizations make it a priority to develop communication skills that are on par with expert clinical skills.”

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For copies of the *Silence Kills* study report and the AACN *Standards for Establishing and Sustaining Healthy Work Environments*, visit <http://www.rxforbettercare.org>.

With 100,000 members and constituents, the American Association of Critical-Care Nurses is the largest specialty nursing organization in the world. Its headquarters are located in Aliso Viejo, Calif. Founded in 1969, the association has more than 240 chapters in the U.S. and abroad and is working toward a healthcare system driven by the needs of patients and their families, where critical care nurses make their optimal contribution. Complete information about AACN is available at <http://www.aacn.org>.

A world leader in leadership training and organizational performance, VitalSmarts. (<http://www.vitalsmarts.com>) provides products and services to hundreds of companies, including over 300 of the Fortune 500. For over twenty-five years, and with over 20,000 participants, the company principals have researched methods for bringing about systematic and lasting change.

*Communication in the Healthcare Workplace:
A Prescription for Better Care*

Frequently Asked Questions

Q: Why did AACN and VitalSmarts conduct this research?

A: It has been widely documented by the Joint Commission on Accreditation of Healthcare Organizations, the Institute of Medicine and others that poor communication between caregivers can lead to medical errors, which endangers patient safety. The American Association of Critical-Care Nurses (AACN) and VitalSmarts joined forces on this study to explore more deeply the communication and collaboration challenges that are present in US hospitals today and to propose solutions.

Q: What were the survey objectives?

A: The purpose of the research project was to map the kinds of conversations that are especially crucial within a hospital setting. Our goal was to identify the categories of conversations that are especially difficult and, at the same time, especially essential for people in healthcare to master. This research was designed to demonstrate how seven crucial conversations can have an outsized impact on quality of care, patient safety, commitment, and retention.

The study identified seven key topics where speaking up is especially important —where the ability to confront has a disproportionate impact on hospital performance.

1. **Broken Rules:** A caregiver notices someone breaking or about to break a policy or rule, and decides whether to speak up.
2. **Mistakes:** A caregiver wonders whether a person is making or about to make a mistake, and decides whether to speak up.
3. **Emergencies:** A caregiver needs immediate help.
4. **Competence:** Caregivers who don't speak up when they see a mistake allow the mistake to continue. As the mistakes add up they blame the other party, questioning their competence.
5. **Bad Attitudes:** Caregivers who don't speak up when they face emergencies or when they see rules violated allow the status quo to continue. They continue to receive no help and rules continue to be violated. As the problems grow into patterns they blame the other party, questioning their attitude and work ethic.
6. **Disrespect:** People who don't speak up when they question people's work ethic, tend to act toward them in disrespectful, intimidating, or abusive ways.

7. **Micromanagement:** People who don't speak up when they question people's competence, tend to micromanage them.

Q: What are the key findings and recommendations?

A: The prevalent culture of poor communication and collaboration among health professionals contributes significantly to continued medical errors and staff turnover. Additionally, a lack of adequate support systems, skills and personal accountability results in communication gaps that can cause harm to patients.

However, the survey reveals the important benefits of better communication in healthcare workplaces: healthcare workers who are confident in their ability to raise these crucial concerns report observing better patient outcomes and are more satisfied with their jobs.

It is critical that healthcare organizations create healthy work environments and cultures of safety where healthcare workers are able to candidly approach each other about their concerns.

Among the study's key findings:

- 84 percent of physicians and 62 percent of nurses and other clinical-care providers have seen co-workers taking shortcuts that could be dangerous to patients.
- 88 percent of physicians and 48 percent of nurses and other providers work with people who show poor clinical judgment.
- Fewer than ten percent of physicians, nurses and other clinical staff directly confront their colleagues about their concerns, and one in five physicians said they have seen harm come to patients as a result.
- Ten percent of healthcare workers who are confident in their ability to raise these crucial concerns observe better patient outcomes, work harder, are more satisfied and are more committed to staying in their jobs.

In an effort to identify specific solutions to these concerns, AACN and VitalSmarts recommendations include:

- Adopting "AACN Standards for Establishing and Sustaining Healthy Work Environments: A Journey to Excellence" which provide a specific framework to promote the communication and collaboration needed to ensure patient safety and enhance staff recruitment and retention.
- Establishing a baseline and a target for improvement on the seven crucial conversations identified in the study.
- Focusing on the problem areas where conversations aren't happening, often in high-stress, high impact areas such as the emergency room or intensive care units.
- Implementing comprehensive training programs that engage organizational leaders; use high quality, relevant materials and receive the sustained attention of healthcare professionals.

Q: What are the barriers to these “crucial conversations” in the healthcare workplace?

A: The vast majority of healthcare professionals are dedicated, highly skilled individuals and hospitals are committed to high quality health care delivery and patient safety. Unfortunately, confronting people is difficult and the reluctance to do so is deeply rooted in human behavior. Respondents cited lack of ability and low confidence as major obstacles to direct communication. Other obstacles include time, people’s perception that it’s not their role to confront and fear of retaliation.

On an encouraging note, the 10 percent of healthcare workers who are confident in their ability to raise these crucial concerns observe better patient outcomes and are more satisfied with their jobs.

Q: What was the design and methodology for the study? How did you gather the data?

A: Researchers conducted dozens of focus groups, interviews, and workplace observations, and then collected survey data from more than 1,700 nurses, physicians, clinical-care staff, and administrators during the later half of 2004. Their research sites included urban, suburban, and rural hospitals. These hospitals included a mix of teaching, general and pediatric hospitals.

Specifically, the research was conducted in two phases:

- **Phase 1:** Fifteen interviews with physicians, nurses and administrators, twelve focus groups, and hundreds of hours of observations at five hospitals.
- **Phase 2:** A 75-item online survey of 1,200 nurse physician clinical-care staff and administrators at eleven hospitals. These hospitals were in the South, Midwest, Northeast, and West.

Q: How did you select and recruit the participants for the study?

A: Vital Smarts worked with AACN and hospital groups to identify a broad range of physicians, nurses and other clinical care workers that work in a variety of hospital settings and geographic locations.

Q: What did the survey reveal in terms of specific links to better communication in the workplace and improved patient safety?

A: Over the course of 150 hours of observations and interviews, time and again researchers saw and heard of specific cases where people’s failure to speak up allowed problems to persist—and in some cases caused harm to come to patients. For example, they observed what happened when someone violated infection standards by failing to

wash—or adequately wash—their hands. The low likelihood that anyone would speak up under these conditions became quickly apparent.

Researchers then gathered confirming data through the survey of 1700 health care workers. This study showed a powerful correlation between people’s tendency to avoid crucial conversations and their perception of care quality and patient safety. The survey does not prove that failure to speak up *causes* safety problems, but it does confirm that there is a strong relationship between the two. In fact, the correlations—some more than .4—are extraordinarily strong. The second important number is the “p” value. This shows there is less than a one in one-thousand chance that this strong correlation is due to chance. The clear message of the survey data is that failure to speak up about these seven concerns is strongly related to poorer health outcomes.

Q: What are the AACN Standards?

A: “AACN Standards for Establishing and Sustaining Healthy Work Environments: A Journey to Excellence” provides a specific framework to promote core competencies, such as communication and collaboration, that will ensure patient safety, enhance staff recruitment and retention and maintain an organization’s financial viability. It is a call to action for nurses, health professionals and healthcare organizations to fulfill their obligation of creating healthy work environments where safety becomes the norm and excellence the goal.

Specifically, the standards are:

- **Skilled Communication** – Nurses must be as proficient in communication skills as they are in clinical skills.
- **True Collaboration** – Nurses must be relentless in pursuing and fostering collaboration.
- **Effective Decision Making** – Nurses must be valued and committed partners in making policy, directing and evaluating clinical care and leading organizational operations.
- **Appropriate Staffing** – Staffing must ensure the effective match between patient needs and nurse competencies.
- **Meaningful Recognition** – Nurses must be recognized and must recognize others for the value each brings to the work of the organization.
- **Authentic Leadership** – Nurse leaders must fully embrace the imperative of a healthy work environment, authentically live it and engage others in its achievement.

Q: What are some practical ways healthcare organizations can apply these standards?

A: AACN encourages nurses and health professionals to embrace their personal obligation to participate in creating health work environments and calls on healthcare organizations to establish the organizational systems and structures required for

successful education, implementation and evaluation of the standards. AACN's next step, which is already underway, is to lead the way in developing practical and relevant resources to support individuals and organization in standards implementation.

Q: What are VitalSmarts' training recommendations?

A: First, VitalSmarts suggests that healthcare leaders recognize that people's ability to skillfully handle these seven crucial conversations is a leading indicator of progress or problems in their organizations. As such, we recommend that leaders both measure and lead progress in this key skill area.

1. First, they should add the seven crucial conversations to existing employee surveys to assess whether efforts to improve are paying off.
2. Second, they should offer training to all clinical staff in handling these crucial conversations. Past research suggests the following as "critical success factors" in delivery of this training:
 - a. Leaders should teach – when attempting to change deeply embedded cultural practices, the best approach is to "cascade" new skills from the top to the bottom by having leaders do the teaching.
 - b. Targeted materials – the training concepts must focus not on communication in general—but on how to handle the specific politically and emotionally risky challenges identified in this study.
 - c. Spaced learning – the training should not be delivered in a "one-shot" fashion—but should be spaced over time to allow for sustained attention, increased transference, and participant accountability for application.

VITAL SMARTS FACT SHEET

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BACKGROUND: A global leader in organizational performance and leadership, VitalSMARTS provides training and consulting services to thousands of organizations, including more than 300 of the Fortune 500. For more than 25 years, the company principals have researched methods for bringing about systematic and lasting change. Crucial Conversations®, (including The New York Times bestselling book of the same title — McGraw-Hill 2002) delivers a set of influence tools that vitalize companies, strengthen teams, improve communities and enrich relationships. Borrowing from more than 20 years of research, VitalSMARTS introduces its newest Wall Street Journal and New York Times bestselling title, Crucial Confrontations (McGraw-Hill 2004), as well as a new set of training tools that teach organizations, teams and individuals to effectively deal with violated expectations in a way that solves the problem at hand and strengthens the relationship in the process. VitalSMARTS also offers other services including keynote speaking, on-site consulting, customized development and executive mastery retreats. The company was founded in 1990 and is privately held.

PURPOSE: VitalSMARTS provides organization development consulting and soft-skills training to an international client base, including 300 of the Fortune 500. These tools bring rapid change in vital behaviors that drive significant and measurable business performance improvement. In 1990 the company's partners, Joseph Grenny, Al Switzler, Kerry Patterson, and Ron McMillan determined to develop a consulting approach that ensure the development and long-term retention of crucial skills — a promise that most vendors could not make. At the end of each project, they presented hard data to support that:

- 1) Behavior had fundamentally changed across the organization; and
- 2) Changed behaviors were responsible for driving significant improvements in performance.

SOLUTIONS: VitalSMARTS delivers solutions that make individuals, teams, and organizations measurably more vital. What does it mean to be vital? By definition, it is to be "full of life, vigor, energy." An organization that is vital is thriving and adapting to change. Individuals who are vital are able to raise and discuss even the most controversial topics in a way that gets results and builds relationships. VitalSMARTS offers a myriad of training solutions for helping individuals and organizations learn and practice the specific skills in the areas of:

- Communication
- Supervision
- Teamwork
- Personal effectiveness
- Leadership
- Customer service
- Strategic culture change
- Performance management

RESEARCH & RESULTS:

Having researched more than 20,000 people in hundreds of organizations over twenty-five years, VitalSmarts has focused on specific critical behaviors and learnable skills that the most vital organizations and individuals use to achieve results.

VitalSmarts' approach to organization change helps leaders bring about rapid change in the vital behaviors that lead to significant and measurable improvement in performance. Past projects have led to 50% improvements in productivity, 30% reductions in errors and 60% reduction in turnover of key personnel. The CEO of one organization recognized the work of VitalSmarts with enabling their winning of the \$200 billion Joint Strike Fighter program.

CLIENTS:

A sample of VitalSmarts' clients includes:

<i>Amer. Assoc. of Critical-Care Nurses</i>	<i>Internal Revenue Service</i>
<i>Abbott Labs</i>	<i>Key Bank</i>
<i>Accenture</i>	<i>Lennox</i>
<i>Associated Foods</i>	<i>Lockheed Martin</i>
<i>AT&T</i>	<i>Loyola Medical Center</i>
<i>Beaumont Hospital</i>	<i>MBNA</i>
<i>Bell Helicopter</i>	<i>Mervyn's</i>
<i>BF Goodrich</i>	<i>Microsoft</i>
<i>Boeing</i>	<i>National Semiconductor</i>
<i>Capital Broadcasting Corp.</i>	<i>Northrop Grumman</i>
<i>Celebration Health</i>	<i>OGE Electric Services</i>
<i>Cisco</i>	<i>Oracle</i>
<i>Conoco Phillips</i>	<i>Philips Electronics</i>
<i>Cook Children's Health Care</i>	<i>Providence Health System</i>
<i>Department of the Treasury</i>	<i>Putnam</i>
<i>Discover Card</i>	<i>Qualcomm</i>
<i>Fidelity National Financial</i>	<i>Riverside County, CA.</i>
<i>Ford Motor Company</i>	<i>Shell Oil Company</i>
<i>Freddie Mac</i>	<i>Sprint</i>
<i>Glaxo Smith Kline</i>	<i>Sutter Health</i>
<i>GE Industrial Systems</i>	<i>Texaco</i>
<i>Haliburton Energy Services Group</i>	<i>The Southern Company</i>
<i>Harley-Davidson</i>	<i>U.S. Department of HUD</i>
<i>Hewlett Packard</i>	<i>USANA</i>
<i>Honda Motor Company</i>	<i>Veritas</i>
<i>IBM</i>	<i>Virginia Medical Center</i>
<i>Intel</i>	<i>Xerox</i>
<i>Intermountain Health Care</i>	

AWARDS:

VitalSmarts offers award-winning training products and solutions that have gained the recognition of some of the industry's largest and most influential associations and publications. In addition, the VitalSmarts executive team has earned top honors for their leadership, success, vision, and dedication. Awards received in 2004 include:

- HR Executive Magazine - Product of the Year Award, Crucial Conversations Training
- Corporate University Cubic Award - Most Innovative Industry Resource, Crucial Conversations Training
- New York Times Bestseller, Wall Street Journal Bestseller, #1-Ranked Amazon.com Business List, #1-Ranked 800-CEO-READ – *Crucial Confrontations: Tools for Resolving Broken Promises, Violated Expectations and Bad Behavior* (McGraw-Hill, 2004)
- Ernst and Young - Entrepreneur of the Year Award
- Mountain West Venture Group - Utah Emerging Elite Award