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THE CENTRAL SUPPLY ROOM : A SERVICE AND  
TEACHING UNIT

by

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The Central Supply Room provides an essential service to the hospital. An integral part of the hospital, its purpose is to assist with the improvement of patient care and safety. It provides for effective cleaning and sterilization of equipment and supplies and one way in which its efficiency is demonstrated is through the economical utilization of personnel, time and materials. It facilitates uniformity of procedures used throughout the hospital. In addition to being a service which contributes towards the provision of better patient care; it affords opportunities for nursing students and service personnel to acquire a knowledge of, and competence in, the techniques of aseptic and related procedures.

There are a number of factors to be considered in planning for and operating the Central Supply Room. Its location and the number and category of personnel assigned to it are two important considerations. The location of this unit must be central, making for it being easily accessible to all other units and departments. Required to head the unit is a professional nurse who will be responsible for its administration

and for the supervision and education of staff and students. This nurse will require a thorough knowledge of the needs of the patient for nursing and medical care and a sound understanding of hospital management and economy. She will require the ability to deal effectively with people and to assist her associates to change and adapt to new requirements, as changes take place in the nature of patient care afforded.

For the most part the personnel working in this area will be aides and assistants who are not nurses, professional or auxiliary, but will form part of the nursing system of the hospital. Intensive on-the-job training will be required by these workers, who will have to acquire appreciation of the importance of their work in preparing equipment and supplies which will be safe for use in giving patient care. Further, these workers will have to have the willingness and ability to adapt to, and cope with, modifications and changes demanded by new developments in patient care and by the individual requirements of the patients and the technical hospital personnel.

In planning the physical lay-out of the Central Supply Room, careful consideration must be given to such matters as the direction of the work flow and facilities such as working counters, sinks, cupboards and storage areas, for both sterile and unsterile equipment and supplies. If such factors are given due consideration, economy of effort, time and materials is achieved and demonstrated clearly will be the advantage of having a central service to deal with activities which would otherwise have to be carried out in the individual ward, unit or section.

A considerable portion of the hospital budget is devoted to the purchase of equipment and supplies. It has been demonstrated that these costs can be reduced when there is an effective Central Supply unit in operation. The establishment of the unit will require an initial outlay of considerable capital but, once the unit is in full and efficient operation, significant reduction in the annual expenditure for equipment and supplies results. Equipment receives better care when looked after by a central unit and therefore lasts longer; there is economy in terms of avoidance of duplication of equipment and of having it lying unused for long periods of time. Time and effort are saved by the hospital stores unit when equipment and supplies are issued to a central

unit - the Central Supply Room. The cleaning, processing, assembling, repairing and sterilization of equipment and supplies in this one unit, which also is responsible for its distribution, permits nurses and other hospital workers to devote more time to their appropriate and important functions. The nurse has more time to devote to other aspects of her patient's care when already prepared for her are the syringe, needles and cotton swabs required for the administration of a hypodermic or intramuscular injection. Further, there is reduction in the possibility of contamination of the equipment & so of the danger to the patient of infection.

The number of hours of the day during which the Central Supply Room is in operation, and the system established for the distribution of equipment and supplies, depend on the size of hospital and on the number and variety of services provided.

In some hospitals, the Central Supply Room is in operation throughout the twenty-four hour period of the day. In small hospitals, this may not be possible and/or necessary. Further, the arrangement made depends not only on the size of the institution but also on the extent to which the Central Supply Room serves the hospital : in some hospitals this unit serves the wards and outpatient clinics only; in others, it serves all departments including the operating theatres, delivery rooms and laboratories. The Central Supply Room should be in operation for a sufficient length of time daily to allow for equipment and supplies to be in readiness whenever needed and to provide that all of its services are in operation during the peak work periods of the hospital day. If closed for part of the twenty-four hour period, one of two arrangements can be made to enable units to have access to equipment and supplies in an emergency : a special, emergency supply can be kept in some central area or each ward (or section) can have equipment and supplies which, being in addition to the stock kept on hand at all times for normal, routine needs, are reserved specifically for emergencies.

Three methods of distribution of supplies and equipment from the Central Supply Room are :

1. The head of a unit - the head nurse in case of a ward - having checked the stock on hand against the established requirements for same, submits a daily requisition for equipment and supplies required. The personnel of the Central Supply Room deliver the requisitioned items each morning, picking up used materials for re-processing.

2. The head of the unit again makes out a requisition for requirements but a member of the unit staff picks up the new supply and returns used materials. This method is considered to be less economical in terms of both time and effort.

3. A dumb waiter system is provided for the delivery and return of supplies and equipment.

Whatever may be the method of distribution established, it is most important that an accurate record be kept of the movement and location of all equipment and supplies and special forms and record books are needed for this purpose.

Required in the Central Supply Room is a procedure manual, which covers all policies and techniques of the work of the unit. Compiled by a committee, chaired by the nursing supervisor of the unit and with its members including the director of nursing services, a head nurse, a staff nurse and a representative from the medical staff, this manual would be used constantly by the unit's personnel and is a valuable teaching tool. Constant attention to required revision is necessary to make the manual useful and reliable. Standardization of equipment and supplies included in any single bundle or package and uniformity in the manner of packaging provides for users to become acquainted easily with contents and to maintain asepsis when opening the bundle or package.

In addition to offering a valuable service to patients and staff, the Central Supply Room can provide a good learning experience for nursing students. The nursing supervisor of the unit would be responsible for the teaching and supervision of the students, ensuring that the experience is truly educational and that the students are not used to replace absent staff members. To ensure that the programme afforded is an educational one, the supervisor needs to assess frequently its effectiveness, through the evaluation of the students' progress.

It is suggested that a two-week experience is adequate to enable the nursing student to acquire a basic understanding of the policies and practices of the unit and it is preferable that the experience be afforded early in her study programme as the knowledge and skills of asepsis acquired will be useful to her in all of her nursing practice. In the experience provided in this unit, it is essential that emphasis be placed on the part it plays in promoting the welfare and safety of the patient, reminding the student that the personnel and work of the unit have a relationship with the patient, indirect as it may be. This emphasis will increase the student's awareness of the importance of the service and will develop and sustain her interest in the work of the unit and in acquiring a sound knowledge of the principles and practices of asepsis.

The number of students assigned for experience in the Central Supply Room at any one time will be determined by the size of the unit and the extent of the services provided. It is to be kept in mind that there must be sufficient opportunity for each student to acquire as much knowledge as possible while at the same time the work of the staff of the unit must not be hindered.

In the Central Supply Room, the nursing student learns the practices of mechanical cleansing, and of physical and chemical disinfection, which have been presented to her theoretically in her courses in fundamentals of nursing, microbiology, etc. This experience gives her a good basis for proceeding to other practice areas, including the operating theatre and delivery room. In this area, the student can also observe and learn good management, for demonstrated to her can be the economical and effective utilization of personnel, time, and materials. Further, the student can be assisted to acquire an understanding of the budget and economy of the hospital through an introduction to the cost of equipment and of its maintenance. This should lead to an appreciation of the need for economy in the use of supplies and efficiency in the care of equipment. The individually packaged surgical dressing bundle can be used to illustrate this latter point : if the student knows of the work involved in packaging this bundle, of the cost of the disposable materials included, and of the time and cost of autoclaving, she will be more inclined to

avoid contamination which will result in her having to use an additional bundle and to desist from using this material for other than the purpose for which it is intended. In this unit, the student can also learn of the various types of equipment used throughout the hospital and can be instructed of their use, care and value. This will prepare her to cope more adequately when utilizing the equipment in providing patient care.

The experience in this relatively small unit can also provide for the student to develop and use problem-solving skills, in relation to problems of : the shortage or lack of certain supplies and the need for substitution; modifications in equipment and supplies required in unusual instances or to meet the needs of a particular patient; etc. Also, the student can learn of the abilities and responsibilities of the aides and assistants in the nursing system and this appreciation and understanding can assist her to establish the interpersonal relationships with this group that are essential for the provision of a climate that is conducive to affording quality nursing care.

The Central Supply Room, then, can serve effectively and economically to provide improved and safer care for the patient and meaningful learning experiences for the nursing student.

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