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Three Madison hospitals lag in labeling standards; Meriter has complied

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Nearly 80 percent of hospitals in the state have standardized the colors of patient wristbands, but Meriter Hospital is the only one in Madison to have joined them.

Hospitals in Madison, meanwhile, continue to use different colors for warning labels on bags of medications.

Health-care officials around the country have recognized the colors of wristbands and drug labels as an important patient safety issue. Standardized color-coding can help prevent mistakes by health-care workers who are employed at more than one facility where different colors may mean different things, authorities say.

Four years ago, at an unidentified hospital in Pennsylvania, a nurse mistakenly put a yellow wristband on a patient. At some hospitals, that means blood should not be drawn from that arm. But at that particular hospital, it meant "do not resuscitate." The patient, who required resuscitation, nearly died before someone noticed the mistake, according to a report from Pennsylvania's Patient Safety Authority.

The Wisconsin Hospital Association asked hospitals last May to agree to use certain colors for wristbands when they are used for various purposes. The bands should be purple for "do not resuscitate," red for allergies and yellow for patients who might fall and hurt themselves, the group said, and identification wristbands should be white or clear.

As of March 1, 101 of the state's 127 hospitals, including Meriter, had complied, said Dana Richardson of the hospital association.

None of the hospitals in Madison, including Meriter, use wristbands for allergies, so the requirement for red doesn't apply.

St. Mary's will change its "do not resuscitate" wristbands from blue to purple and its fall risk bands from green to yellow, said spokesman Steve Van Dinter.

UW Hospital will adopt purple for "do not resuscitate" by this summer but doesn't use colors for fall risk, said spokeswoman Lisa Brunette.

Madison's Veterans Affairs hospital, which coordinates its colors with other VA hospitals, uses red bands for "do not resuscitate" and doesn't use colors for fall risk, said spokesman Scott Krueger.

Each of the Madison hospitals takes other steps to try to prevent errors, the officials said.

The hospitals continue to use different colors for drug warning labels.

At Meriter and St. Mary's, pink labels are placed on bags of epidural drugs to warn that they should be given near the spine, not in the arm.

At UW Hospital and the Veterans Hospital, the warning stickers on epidural bags are yellow. Meriter and St. Mary's use yellow stickers for the opposite reason — for drugs to be given intravenously, or in the arm.

Stickers on bags of drugs to be delivered intrathecally — closer to the spine than an epidural — are green at Meriter, purple at UW and pink at Veterans Hospital. St. Mary's doesn't use such labels.

A drug label was cited as one of several factors in the death of Fitchburg teen Jasmine Gant at St. Mary's Hospital in 2006. Investigators said nurse Julie Thao ignored a pink warning label on a bag of spinal medication and put the drug in Gant's arm, which caused her death.

The Madison Patient Safety Collaborative, which includes all of the hospitals, has considered standardizing the colors of drug labels.

But the issue is complicated because health-care workers administer drugs so frequently, Kendra Jacobsen, the group's executive director, has said.

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