

What's New in the Patient Safety World

June 2025

Cellphones and the Surgical Timeout

We've often been on our soap box regarding cellphones in the OR (see list of prior columns below). We're glad to see others have joined the crusade! A new editorial in JAMA Surgery ([McCarthy 2025](#)) proposes adding the statement (or one similar in essence) to the universal surgical timeout: "The use of mobile devices is not permitted during the operation except for matters pertaining to patient care."

We wholeheartedly agree.

In their editorial, McCarthy and Rao note that leading perioperative counsels have not advocated for a hard stop to mobile device use in the OR. Rather, representative language consists of terms, such as "discourage" or "minimize". They note that the American College of Surgeons states that "whenever possible, members of the OR team, including the operating surgeon, should only engage in urgent or emergent outside communication during an operation. Personal and routine calls should be minimized. All phone calls should be kept as brief as possible."

It is essential that the "sterile cockpit" analogy from aviation should apply to the surgical timeout and other critical points in any surgery or procedure. But it is also essential that distractions and interruptions that cellphones may bring should also be avoided any time during the procedure. The hard part would be knowing whether an incoming call on a cellphone is a "matter pertaining to patient care". Most inquiries related to patient care can be handled quietly via computer from the OR and conversations with pathologists, etc., can be done over an OR landline or intercom. So, we continue to discourage use of cellphones in the OR. Our prior columns listed below, particularly our February 23, 2021 Patient Safety Tip of the Week "[Cellphones and the OR](#)", have good discussions on the issue.

Prior Patient Safety Tips of the Week dealing with cell phones:

- November 27, 2012 "[Dealing with Distractions](#)"
- April 16, 2013 "[Distracted While Texting](#)"
- May 21, 2013 "[Perioperative Distractions](#)"

- March 17, 2015 [“Distractions in the OR”](#)
- July 21, 2015 [“Avoiding Distractions in the OR”](#)
- February 9, 2016 [“It was just a matter of time...”](#)
- August 20, 2019 [“Yet Another \(Not So\) Unusual RSI”](#)
- January 28, 2020 [“Dang Those Cell Phones!”](#)
- February 23, 2021 [“Cellphones and the OR”](#)
- January 11, 2022 [“Documenting Distractions in the OR”](#)

References:

McCarthy JE, Rao VK. Mobile Devices Restricted—Updating the Surgical Timeout. JAMA Surg 2025; 160(5): 479-480
<https://jamanetwork.com/journals/jamasurgery/article-abstract/2830462>

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