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Pathologist Teams Up with Operating Room Staff to Speed Specimen Handling

When David Hicks, MD, FCAP, a breast pathologist, joined the pathology group at the University of Rochester Medical Center in Rochester, New York in 2008, the average time from collection to fixation for most specimens was more than two hours.

As part of an ongoing effort to reduce errors in patient specimens, the pathology department wondered whether all specimens could be brought to the gross lab as soon as they became available and if this could reduce the time to fixation, a common issue in hospitals and clinics.

According to Dr. Hicks, “As we looked how to reduce the time from collection to fixation, we realized we had to standardize our specimen handling; and we had to look at what we could do proactively in the lab to make that happen, rather than pushing an already busy OR staff to do more.”

Working together, the OR staff and the pathology laboratory staff cut the average time to fixation to 31 minutes.

Furthermore, after learning of the success of the trial, the hospital administration agreed to fund two additional laboratory staff in order to make proactive specimen collection the standard in the laboratory. These efforts have clearly improved the quality of specimens in clinical care and also serve as an important patient safety monitor.

Previously, an OR nurse would transport specimens to the pathology gross room at the end of each procedure through a pneumatic tube system or store them in a refrigerator for later pick-up.

Under the new process, OR staff calls pathology on a cell phone when a specimen has been collected, and the technical staff goes to the operating room to pick it up. The pathology technician also performs an immediate eight-point quality assurance check of the requisition and the specimen. Any errors or discrepancies can be corrected on the spot before the specimen leaves the OR.

“The transformative piece in our situation is that we had to first look to ourselves to see what we could do proactively, and then we had to negotiate a new and more effective process with our colleagues,” said Dr. Hicks. “In addition to an increase in quality care and patient safety, the working relationships we have with OR staff have been strengthened.”