

How to Improve Handoffs in Radiology



A leading cause of medical error, handoffs are a major communication challenge in diagnostic and interventional radiology practice.

The term “handoff” refers to purposeful movements in care delivery between different providers or clinical settings with the intention of maintaining continuity of care. For radiology, care delivery includes moments such as protocoling, imaging, and image interpretation, which occur between the radiology department and clinical teams. While there is a great deal of research regarding handoffs in medicine, research is much more limited on handoffs in radiology. An article recently published in the [Journal of the American College of Radiology](#) offers three handoff improvement strategies for radiology practice.

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"Communication failures in these moments are among the top five causes of litigation against radiologists with higher rates of indemnity payments awarded because of delayed or missed diagnoses from these communication failures result in significant patient morbidity and mortality," investigators wrote.

How can radiology departments ensure safe handoffs?

1. Focus on individual behaviours: Train staff on potential sources of error (i.e., order requests, report transcriptions, etc.) and use tools like note-taking, repeating information back, checklists, screen-sharing, and virtual consults.
2. Focus on team behaviours: Assign particular handoff times, rather than conducting them randomly; reduce noise in team environments and limit interruptions, and use safety checklists for procedures.
3. Develop organisational strength: Use the electronic health record to automate parts of the handoff protocol, such as reminders, exam orders, and reporting, and establish a safety culture.

Handoffs are common in diagnostic radiology and IR practice and play an integral role in the ability to provide patients with quality care. The frequency of handoffs in radiology underscores the importance of using evidence-based strategies targeting the individual, team, and organisation to improve their effectiveness.

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