Case Study
Patient Safety 104: Root Cause and Systems Analysis

Margaret is an elderly woman who has been admitted to an academic medical center for breathing problems. She has some trouble hearing and has some memory problems as well.

Peter is a well-respected nurse on the medical unit. He has been working there for five years, and he’s recently been helping new nurses get oriented to work in his part of the hospital. Today, he is working with Amy, a new graduate who just passed her boards and received her RN.

Jorge, a respiratory therapist, is called to see Margaret to help with her breathing. He notes that she is not getting enough oxygen using just the nasal prongs, and he switches her to an oxygen mask, which improves her symptoms. Jorge sees Peter in the hallway and says, “Hey, Peter, I upped her oxygen,” as they pass each other on the way to their next tasks. It is a busy day for Jorge, who figures he will write his notes in the chart later.

At 3 pm, Margaret is scheduled to go for a test in the radiology department on the other side of the hospital. Teddy, the patient transporter, arrives to take Margaret to her test. Peter, the experienced nurse, is in another patient’s room, assisting one of the doctors with the placement of a sterile central line. When Teddy asks if there are any special concerns with Margaret, Amy, the new nurse, replies, “No, she’s all set!” If Amy had been told about Margaret’s oxygen mask, she would have accompanied her to the test.

While being transported, Margaret knocks her mask off her face. When she arrives in the radiology department for her test, she is not breathing. The code team is called, but they are unable to revive her.