



THE HEALTHCARE LEADER'S GUIDE:  
PREVENTING PATIENT  
HARM THROUGH BETTER  
COMMUNICATIONS



## WHAT HAPPENS WHEN CARE TEAMS DON'T COMMUNICATE?

A CMIO of a large academic medical center in the Midwest recently shared this cautionary tale with us. A new lead anesthesiologist was vehemently opposed to the existing communication technology (which was not a Spok® solution). He insisted on implementing a separate communication tool within the OR and pushed it through without following the proper approval channels.

The tool worked well enough for communication within the walls of the OR. However, it didn't connect with other departments involved in broader OR workflows, like the ED and recovery rooms. Communication began to fall apart when staff in these departments suddenly couldn't exchange information easily. Although it was a tremendous inconvenience for staff, a larger issue began to emerge: The inability to communicate was affecting patient safety. Care team members couldn't reach anesthesiologists when patients needed them urgently in recovery rooms, and ED patients experienced delays in receiving the surgical attention they required.



Luckily, the CMIO grasped the dangers of the situation and pulled the plug on the one-off communication technology. Yet inadequate communication is common at U.S. hospitals: The Joint Commission has named communication failures the leading root cause of sentinel events due to their role in causing medical errors, delays in treatment, wrong-site surgeries, and operative and postoperative events.<sup>1</sup> In fact, nearly 30 percent of U.S. malpractice cases from 2009-2013 were attributed to communication failures—resulting in nearly 2,000 patient deaths and \$1.7 billion in costs.<sup>2</sup> Another study of 13 ICUs across the U.S. found that patients in the care of less collaborative physicians and nurses had a significantly higher mortality rate than those with providers who were able to collaborate more frequently.<sup>3</sup>

The evidence couldn't be clearer. Communication failures, delays, and errors can cause patient harm, and improving how care teams communicate helps put patient safety at the forefront. Let's explore the five points of failure within the communication infrastructure described above, and how you as a healthcare leader can correct or prevent them at your own organization.

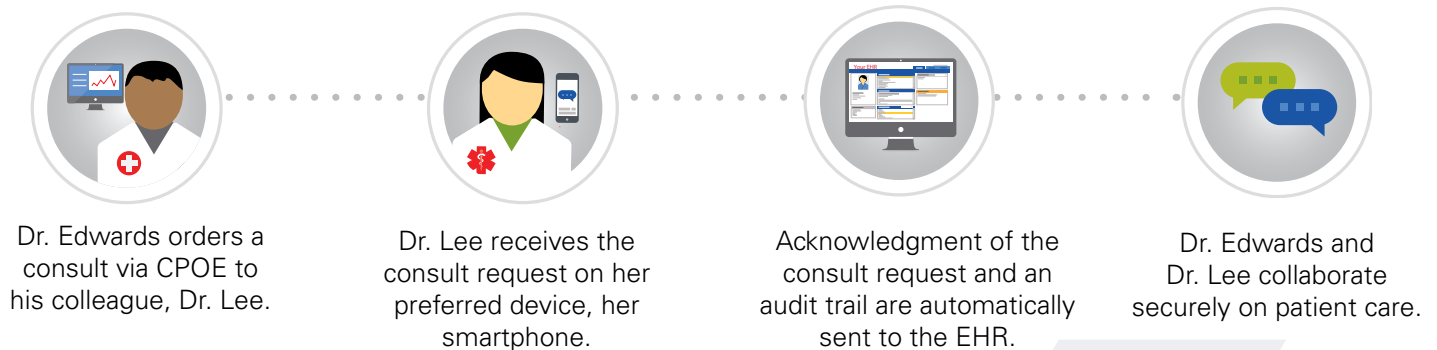
# 1 ISLANDS OF COMMUNICATION

The first mistake this organization made was treating each clinical department as its own island. The separate communication tool worked well within one area. The breakdown occurred when interdepartmental exchanges needed to happen and patients' lives were put on the line when staff had difficulty communicating. The typical care episode involves healthcare professionals from a variety of disciplines providing care at various times of the day. Patient care also includes non-clinical staff members, like transport and environmental services, who need to be reached and involved in parts of the care plan. With all of the roles, schedules, and locations at play, it's critical to take an enterprise approach to care team collaboration.

Healthcare leaders know the value of standardizing systems and processes, and the same goes for communication. Just like a hospital relies on one EHR system, it's important to standardize clinical communications to a single platform as well. Having a centralized, web-based directory and on-call schedules that can be accessed throughout the organization enables care teams to find and act on real-time information. Whenever you are implementing technology, always ask these questions to ensure you're accounting for the bigger communication picture:

- How can we standardize this technology for the entire organization?
- How will this technology affect patient care?
- Will clinicians use this technology?
- How will we gain clinician buy-in?

## Consult Request With Spok Care Connect®:





## 2 A “DO WHAT YOU WANT” CULTURE

The second problem with the scenario described is that this new leader had the ability to implement his own ideas around clinical communication without going through the proper channels. This describes a culture of one person doing what he or she wants versus establishing a team culture that evaluates solutions based on more wide-reaching needs.

Every healthcare organization should have a multidisciplinary governance structure to evaluate clinical communication and collaboration solutions. Not only should care teams know and understand this process, but there should also be checks and balances to prevent a scenario like the one described. First, make sure you have a best practice governance model to determine priority and scope of communication technology projects. Second, it is imperative to involve respected clinicians from multiple departments in the decision-making group to help gain buy-in throughout the organization. These clinicians can also act as technology champions to help promote adoption when it's time to roll out the new solution.

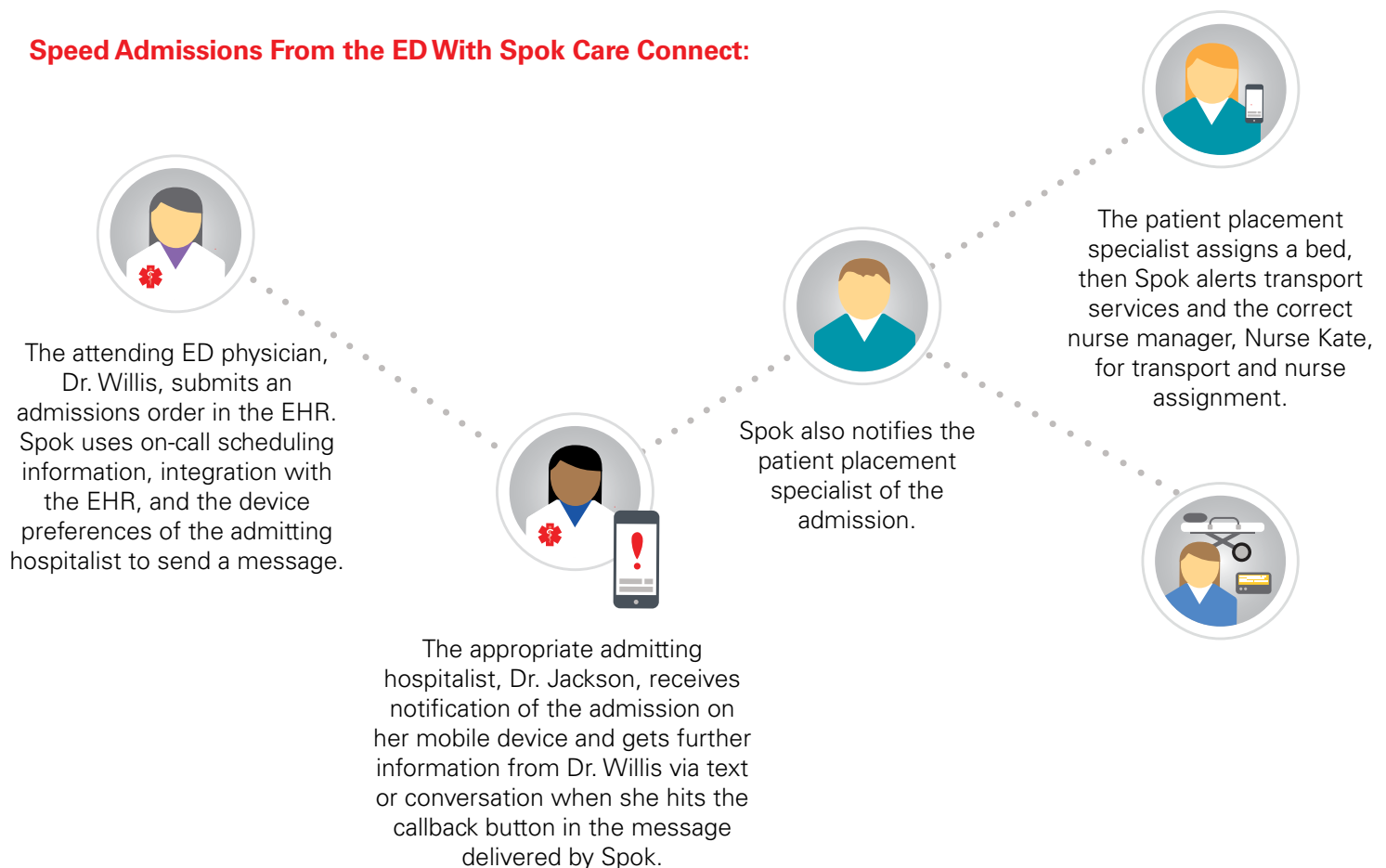


### 3 SUPPORTING JUST ONE DEVICE

In the situation described, having a separate communication tool forced team members in the OR to rely on one device, regardless of role, workflows, cost, or preference. With the proliferation of mobile technology available as well as the different communication requirements for various roles, healthcare organizations need to support many types of communication. Clinicians, for example, must navigate voicemails, text messages, emails, and EHR inbox messages in addition to phone calls, pages, and hallway conversations (“curbside consults”). The ideal communication model, with face-to-face interactions or even phone conversations, is often difficult to accomplish given the need for caregivers to spend focused time with patients. Care is often coordinated virtually and asynchronously.

Hospitals and health systems need a communication approach that supports this reality and enables their care team members to communicate while on the move. Your device mix will be dependent on the roles and workflows your organization needs to support. Ideally, your healthcare communication platform can support all your devices, so each member of the care team can connect to a single source of truth when it comes to critical information: a central, web-based directory that allows contact information and on-call schedules to be updated and accessed anywhere.

#### Speed Admissions From the ED With Spok Care Connect:

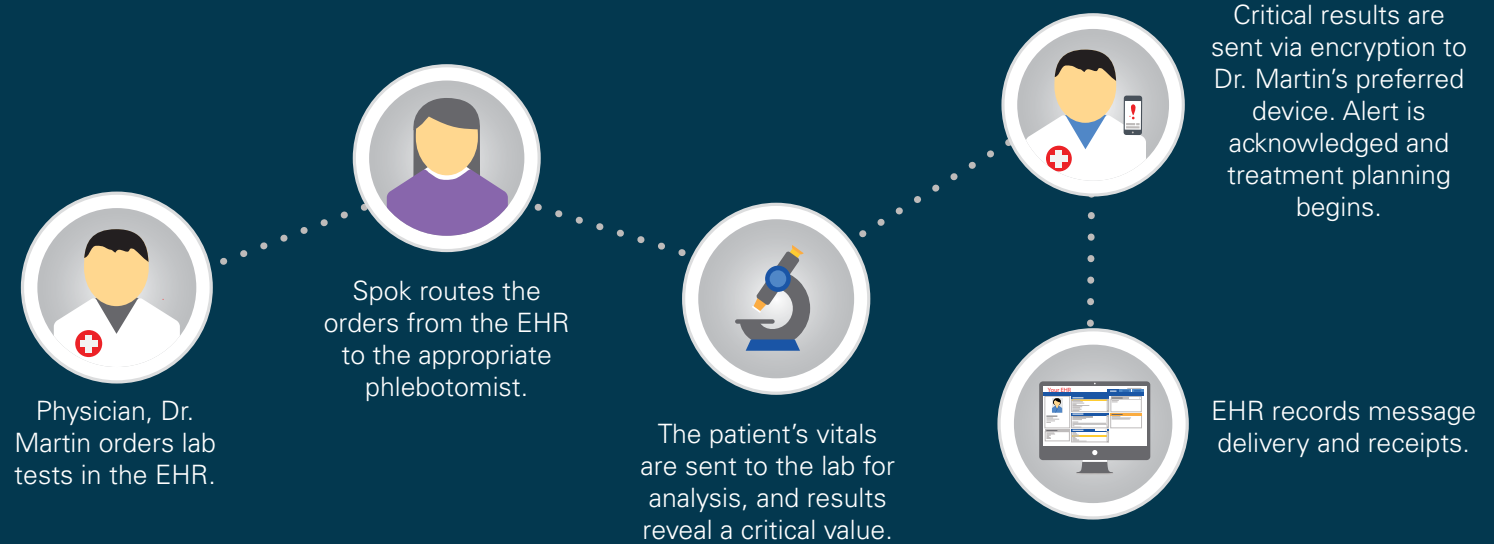


## 4 ONLY INCLUDING PEOPLE

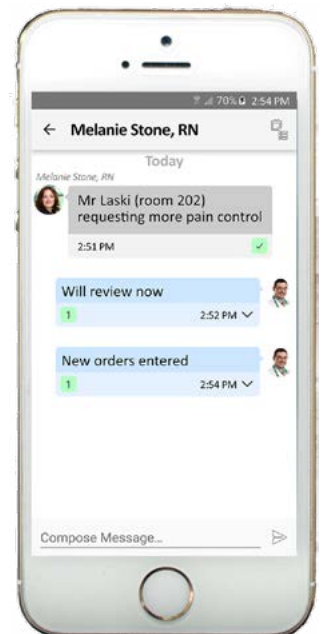
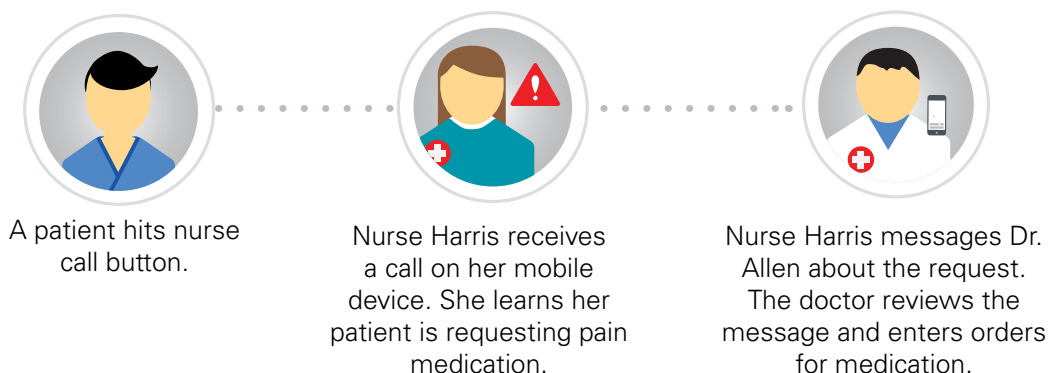
In 2018, the delivery of patient care isn't a people-only operation. It also includes the many systems care team members rely on, such as the EHR, nurse call, patient monitoring, and lab and radiology result systems. It's important that your staff can communicate not only with each other, but also with these critical systems that supply essential updates about patient care.

A healthcare communication platform should be able to receive alerts about important patient events from these systems, so a care team member can quickly see and act on these events and changes in the patient condition. Sending the right alerts to the right person or role and escalating as appropriate helps ensure patients get the care and intervention they need, when they need it.

### Sharing Critical Test Results With Spok Care Connect:



### Clinical Alerting With Spok Care Connect:



## 5 THE INABILITY TO LEARN FROM MISTAKES

The fallout from this OR communication situation actually took longer to uncover than you may think because there was no ability to track, audit, and learn from the mistake. The separate communication tool wasn't part of an enterprise strategy, and it is difficult to analyze data in isolation without context and a full view of the big picture. Each care team member who discovered an issue related to the separate communication infrastructure likely considered it an isolated incident. There wasn't an easy way for patterns to be detected.

A robust healthcare communication platform allows hospitals to track responses. It maintains an audit trail so you can see who sent the message, who received it, and whether the recipient acknowledged the message and when. If you have escalations in place, you can also monitor that workflow and track how long it took for a response. This is helpful for future reference, should a malpractice case or departmental dispute arise. Communication processes can also be analyzed on an ongoing basis to spot opportunities for improvement and set goals. Measure your performance, celebrate your success, and go after the opportunities.

### Escalation With Spok Care Connect:



Radiologist makes a critical finding in his reading and alerts ordering physician, Dr. Johnson.



Dr. Johnson is unavailable and does not acknowledge the message after 2 minutes.



Based on predetermined preferences, Spok escalates the alert to Dr. Alexander, who acknowledges it.



Dr. Alexander taps the message to view the image on her mobile PACS viewer and is able to treat the patient quickly and effectively.

## WHAT HAPPENS WHEN CARE TEAMS GET COMMUNICATIONS RIGHT

We hope this analysis of a failed communication infrastructure has given you food for thought regarding your own organization. When communication breaks down, patient safety can be adversely affected. Having the right technology, process, and culture to support frictionless clinical communications often generates results such as:

- Marked improvement in real-time communication
- Faster response times
- Improved patient care and faster discharges
- Increased patient and clinician satisfaction

Seconds matter in healthcare. By giving clinicians enterprise tools that allow them to receive, process, and act on information more quickly, you can help improve patient safety throughout your organization. Learn more about the industry's leading healthcare communication platform, [Spok Care Connect](#).

**Banner Health**

**\$1.5 Million**

saved over 5 years  
through increased staff efficiency



View ROI Results Spok  
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## References

<sup>1</sup> [Patient Safety and Quality: An Evidence-Based Handbook for Nurses](#)

<sup>2</sup> [Malpractice Risks in Communication Failures](#)

<sup>3</sup> [Nurse-to-Physician Communications: Connecting for Safety](#)



## ABOUT SPOK, INC.

Spok, Inc., a wholly owned subsidiary of Spok Holdings, Inc. (NASDAQ: SPOK), headquartered in Springfield, Virginia, is proud to be the global leader in healthcare communications. We deliver clinical information to care teams when and where it matters most to improve patient outcomes. Top hospitals rely on the Spok Care Connect® platform to enhance workflows for clinicians, support administrative compliance, and provide a better experience for patients. Our customers send over 100 million messages each month through their Spok® solutions. When seconds count, count on Spok.

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