Administering Medications and Drugs

Problem

Administration of a medication can be defined as “the giving by a nurse or authorized person of a drug to a patient”. A medication is defined as any substance or combination of substances having properties for the treatment or prevention of diseases in human beings. Drugs are powerful substances that must be administered safely in order to be effective and to avoid adverse effects. According to the National Patient Safety Agency (UK), the most common medication errors are:

- Wrong dosages, especially with older adults and children
- Medications not administered when needed, especially anticonvulsants and insulin
- Wrong drug(s) given to a patient
- Medication given to the wrong patient.

Consequence

The impact of medication errors can have severe consequences for the patient and their family. Medication errors could also result in action by the employer, the professional regulatory body, and in criminal and/or civil prosecution. Nurses should never underestimate their responsibilities when administering medication or choosing to omit it.

Solution

Here are some suggested steps to take to prevent / avoid medication administration errors.

Basic principles

- Ensure that you have the authorization to administer medications as defined in your scope of practice and specified by relevant legislation and regulations. In some cases, additional training and certification may be required before you can administer prescription drugs.

- Have adequate knowledge about the pharmaceutical product you are administering; this knowledge should be at a level that you are able to question any uncertainty in the dose, route of administration, frequency and potential interactions with other medicines being taken. Never administer a drug about which you know very little or nothing!
• As a practitioner, you have the right (and duty) to question any part of the authorization to administer a medication if unclear about the instructions or preparation. If your knowledge and competence tells you something is wrong – don’t be afraid to challenge!

• Check the patient’s allergy status; if no allergy status is recorded, you should ask the patient. If a patient indicates an allergy to a specific medicine, be sure to check the drug’s generic and brand names to avoid inadvertent administration.

• Ensure you have the right patient. Ask the patient their name and check the identification bracelet. Be especially careful when administering medication in a home or other environment; make sure you have the right patient.

• Medication should NOT be prepared in advance and left for the patient to take, or for another professional to administer.

• Check the medication for the following:
  ▪ Name of medication to ensure that this is the correct drug
  ▪ Right formulation of the drug
  ▪ Correct strength of the preparation
  ▪ Right dose (dosage appears reasonable for this type of patient)
  ▪ Formulation is suitable for route of administration
  ▪ Frequency of administration (check to see when drug was last administered)
  ▪ Expiry date of medicine
  ▪ Visibly inspect for any contamination.

• If a drug calculation is required, this should be documented and retained within the patient’s notes. For critical calculations, have another nurse do the calculation independently and compare results.

• Check the route of administration against the authorization to administer.

• Be aware of the technique for administration; only undertake the task if the technique to be used is within your area of competence.

• Check that the patient’s allergy status has been recorded; it is considered good practice to ask the patient again, if appropriate, if they have any known allergies.

• Delay an administration if you are unsure of the clinical condition of the patient in relation to the drug you are administering. For example, do not administer digoxin if the patient’s pulse is below 60 beats per minute. Document your action and the reasons for it.

• Extra caution should be taken in the administration of controlled drugs. Be familiar with the requirements and protocols in your facility.
Additional precautions

- Check the patient’s medication record to see that the medicine has not been given previously and/or is within the time limits allowed. This will ensure there is no duplication of medication and will reduce the risk of overdosing.

- Check any instructions concerning the administration, e.g., with food or within a time window.

- Check to see if the medication has to be delivered by a special technique.

- Check if there is any additional equipment that should be used to administer the medication, e.g., a spacer being used with an inhaler.

- Ensure you are familiar and competent not only with the medication, but also with any equipment required to safely administer the medicine.

- Check to see if the medication needs to be delivered over a period of time, e.g., an intravenous injection being administered over a time period.

- Check to see if there are any timing delay requirements between the administration of different drugs, or can they all be administered at the same time.

- Check to see what non-prescription or botanical medications the patient may be taking; many of these could interact with prescription-only drugs. Note the use of these other preparations in the patient’s record.

- Check the product information to determine whether the patient requires a period of observation and monitoring after the administration. This may be due to the risk of anaphylaxis or to ensure the full effects of the medication have been achieved.

After medication administration

- After the medication has been administered, the nurse continues to have a duty of care to the patient.

- As a practitioner, you must ensure the patient has the relevant information / warnings concerning the medication and its action, any side effects and how to report them.

- You may need to arrange for follow-up blood tests and monitoring.

- You may need to withhold or delay administration of other medications.

- You may need to request a change to the medication based on the outcomes.

- You will need to complete the course of medication.

- You will need to see that any unused medication is safely disposed according to your agency’s protocols.
Record keeping and reporting

- Record keeping is an essential part of the medication administration process; this area is the most commonly neglected and is frequently the subject of investigations by professional regulatory bodies.

- You must know and follow professional codes and employer’s guidelines on medication administration record keeping.

- The nurse must document any actions taken in relation to medication administration, and that should include any advice given to the patients, and any discussions with the prescriber concerning the administration of the medication.

- If the medication is not given, a clear rationale and reasons must be provided in the patient’s records.

- Any drug errors must be reported as soon as recognized to minimize the possible negative outcomes. Use your employer’s incident reporting forms and follow their policies.

- Report any adverse reactions to medications. This enables licensed pharmaceutical products to be monitored and appropriate actions taken.

References


electronic Medicines Compendium (eMC): http://www.medicines.org.uk

Note: A narrated e-Learning module of this Nugget is available at LearningNurse.com.