Communication problems have long been associated with medical errors and adverse events, and they may be a leading cause of what are known within medicine as “sentinel events”—unexpected occurrences involving death or serious physical or psychological injury. Interruptions, distractions, and the frequency of clinician-to-clinician interactions can all interfere with the process of communication. The problems range from a clinician failing to record or pass along information in a manner that promotes patient safety. There are few guidelines to ensure that spoken communication about health care is as consistent, complete, and accurate as written communication—such as a note in a patient’s medical record.

Consistent: But according to patient safety experts, verbal communication is simply not a reliable way to transmit important information. There are few guidelines to ensure that spoken communication about health care is as consistent, complete, and accurate as written communication—such as a note in a patient’s medical record.

Errors: The nurse residents get feedback from their trainers as well as from the patient simulators. So if, for example, the nurse resident forgets to use structured communication or forgets to “read back” an order or critical test result, nurse educators provide feedback about the potential for error. Sometimes the educators will allow the errors to play out so the nurse residents can see the consequences. So, say a verbal order is for “15” milligrams of a certain medication, but the nurse resident hears “50” milligrams and prepares and administers the wrong dose. If the dose is excessive, the simulator suffers the consequences that a real patient would in an actual clinical situation. The nurse therefore quickly realizes the hazards associated with not reading back the order. Strengthening communication skills helps new nurses develop reliable approaches to communicating pertinent information in a manner that promotes patient safety.

Communication is a complicated process, especially in health-care settings, where we face many challenges in our effort to keep patients safe. As the complexity of the health-care environment increases, clinicians will have to work together to identify and implement strategies that promote reliable verbal communication. Both patients and clinicians can improve the effectiveness of their communications by getting the intended recipient’s attention; providing information in a clear, organized fashion; and repeating important information.

So remember those old games of “gossip” and “telephone”—and keep in mind that what is not written down may change its meaning very quickly and in a most unexpected manner.