Using Group Text Messaging (SMS) to Call Back Nursing Staff

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**Charge Nurses**

**Phoning system:**
- spent up to 2 hours each 12 hour shift phoning off-duty staff to cover sickness, unexpected staff shortages and increased patient numbers
- felt it was a waste of their time
- was extremely stressful at a time when the ICU was already busy
- felt guilty for intruding on and pressuring staff

**Introduction**

Wellington ICU has relied on its own staff working extra shifts to cover shortages for many years. This is due to a lack of specialty nurses available through agencies or casual resource.

**Concept of Group Text Messaging**

The idea was initially introduced by a staff nurse, who heard of it's success in the NZ Fire Service.

Group text messaging to call back staff was introduced into Wellington ICU in December 2007.

**Implementation**

- staff cellphone numbers were entered into the intranet website
- a letter was sent to all staff explaining the process and offering them the opportunity to 'opt out'
- an introductory text message was sent to all staff asking them to phone the ICU to confirm their number
- any staff who didn’t phone back within 24 hours were followed up by the charge nurse responsible for texting
- the system went 'live' immediately and was used extensively throughout an unusually busy summer period

**How Effective is Group Texting?**

An analysis of texts sent between April and September 2008 revealed:
- 99 texts for 102 shifts were sent
- 53 of these resulted in a nurse working an extra shift

The staff response to text messages was inversely related to the number of extra shifts on offer.

**Other Potential Uses**

- major incident e.g. pandemic, plane crash
- specific criteria groups such as nurses who can be in charge, are paediatric trained, or can look after advanced cardiac patients
- reminding staff about study days
- notifying staff about roster deadlines

**Conclusion**

Both charge nurses and staff nurses found text messaging much faster, easier and less intrusive than the former system of phoning staff for extra shifts.

**Staff Nurses**

**Phoning system:**
- felt guilty if they said ‘no’, pressured into saying ‘yes’
- found it intrusive
- felt they had to make a decision instantly
- perceived offering of extra shifts was ‘selective’

**Evaluation of Group Text Messaging**

- questionnaire was sent to charge nurses and staff nurses who did 'in charge' shifts in June 2008
- all 11 respondents preferred texting (compared to phoning) to contact staff for extra shifts

**Graph showing Charge Nurses’ perception comparing texting and phoning staff**

**Graph showing Reasons for Staff Nurses preferring being texted versus phoned for extra shifts**

**Overall, we think it’s GR8!**