

The Gap Between Knowledge and Practice among Critical Care Nurses Regarding the Basic Standards of Critically Ill Patients Shift Handover

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Abstract:

Background: Effective communication during shift handovers can significantly reduce medical errors, prevent information loss, and improve continuity of care for critically ill patients. Despite nurses' knowledge of standardized handover protocols, a clear gap persists between what they know and what they do. **Aim:** this study aim to assess the gap between knowledge and practice among critical care nurses regarding the basic standards of critically ill patients shift handover. **Research Design:** Descriptive correlational research design was utilized in this study. **Setting:** The study was implemented at Intensive Care Units in main Assiut University Hospitals, Assuit city, Egypt. **Subjects:** All available critical care nurses who work in previous mentioned setting. **Data collection:** Two tools were used. **Tool (I):** Nurses' assessment tool. **Part I:** Nurses' Personal Characteristics **Part II:** Nurses' Shift-to-shift handover knowledge questionnaire. **Tool(II):** Nurses' Practice Assessment (Observational Checklist). **Results:** Results showed that 65% of nurses had satisfactory knowledge, but only 33.3% demonstrated adequate practice positive correlation was found between knowledge and practice ($r = 0.185$, $p = 0.043$). **Conclusion:** The study revealed a significant knowledge-practice gap among critical care nurses regarding shift handover. **Recommendations:** 1. Integrate shift handover training into nursing curricula and ongoing in-service education programs. 2. Customize handover protocols. 3. Implement digital handover systems.

Keywords: Basic Standards, Critical Care Nurses, Critically Ill Patients, Gap of Knowledge and Practice & Handover.

Introduction

Nurses face unique challenges in Egypt such as staff shortages and high patient turnover. A recent study highlighted that ICU nurses often experience increased workload and communication gaps during shift handovers, leading to risks in patient safety. These challenges underline the urgent need for standardized handover practices in Egyptian hospitals (El-Sayed & Youssef, 2024).

Adequate knowledge of handover protocols, including frameworks like Situation, Background, Assessment and Recommendation (SBAR) and Identify, Situation, Background, Assessment and Recommendation (ISBAR) is essential for nurses to communicate clinical information clearly and concisely. A study from Cairo University found that Intensive Care Units (ICU) nurses with better theoretical knowledge of handover principles were more confident and efficient during shift handover (Abdelrahman & El-Morsy, 2023). Knowledge empowers nurses to prioritize key details and anticipate potential complications during patient transfer.

The ISBAR framework is a structured communication tool widely used in clinical settings, particularly during nursing handovers. It ensures accurate and

consistent information transfer between healthcare providers. In the Identify (I) step, the nurse states their name, role, and patient details. Situation (S) presents the immediate clinical concern. Background (B) offers relevant medical history. Assessment (A) reflects the nurse's evaluation, and Recommendation (R) suggests appropriate next steps. ISBAR significantly enhances patient safety and reduces communication errors in high-risk environments (Johnson et al., 2023).

A recurring theme in nursing literature is the gap between what nurses know and what they apply in practice. Although protocols exist, studies in both high-resource and low-resource settings have identified significant inconsistencies in handover execution. At Assiut University Hospital, for instance, over 60% of nurses could state key handover steps but only 41% consistently followed them during actual handovers (Mostafa et al., 2025). Effective communication during shift handovers can significantly reduce medical errors, prevent information loss, and improve continuity of care for critically ill patients (Bigham et al., 2023, Harvard Medical School). The complexity and instability of ICU cases require precise and structured information transfer between caregivers, making shift handover a

critical moment of risk and opportunity.

Real-world nursing handover practices often fall short of established standards despite formal training and increased awareness. Observational research conducted in 2024 at Charité–Universitätsmedizin Berlin (Germany) found that essential details—such as medication changes and psychosocial updates—were frequently omitted due to fatigue, workload, or the lack of standardized procedures (Müller et al., 2024). Such omissions can seriously compromise patient safety.

Competency-based training remains central to translating knowledge into consistent practice. A German simulation study demonstrated that nurses who underwent quarterly, high-fidelity handover drills retained critical-step adherence two months longer than those receiving lecture-only refreshers (Keller & Braun, 2024). These findings align with World Health Organization (WHO) recommendations that advocate blended learning—combining didactic modules, peer mentoring, and immersive simulations—to sustain skill acquisition (World Health Organization, 2023).

Significance of the Study:

The handover of critically ill patients in intensive care units (ICUs) is a complex and high-stakes process, where inadequate communication can result in life-threatening errors. Despite the existence of standardized handover protocols, substantial variation persists in how knowledge is translated.

Practice among critical care nurses (Starmer et al., 2023). This study is significant because it addresses this critical gap by systematically assessing both the cognitive (knowledge) and behavioral (practice) aspects of ICU handovers within the Egyptian healthcare context.

This study holds national relevance, particularly for Egyptian institutions such as Cairo and Assiut University Hospitals, where ICU environments are often constrained by high patient loads, limited resources, and fragmented communication systems. The insights derived from this work will support nursing faculty, hospital administrators, and policymakers in revising handover-related curricula, adopting electronic handover tools, and implementing context-appropriate protocols aligned with global best practices (WHO, 2023; Singh et al., 2024).

Aim of the Study:

The primary aim of this study is to assess the gap between knowledge and practice among critical care nurses regarding the basic standards of critically ill patients shift handover.

Research Questions:

1. What is the current level of knowledge among critical care nurses regarding shift-to-shift

handover in intensive care units?

2. To what extent do critical care nurses adhere to the practical standards of handover during shift changes in ICU settings?
3. Is there is a significant gap between knowledge and practice.

Subject and Method:

Study Design:

A descriptive correlational research design was used in the present study.

Study Setting:

The study was conducted in 4 settings; chest ICU, critical care ICU General ICU and Anesthesia ICU at Assiut University Hospitals.

Subjects:

All available nurses who work in previous mentioned settings from both sex, who give direct bedside care, their experience in ICU more than one year and who were 120 nurses).

Intensive Care Units (ICU)	N. of Nurses
Trauma ICU	33
General ICU	25
Critical ICU	35
Anesthesia ICU	27
Total	120

Sample Size:

The sample size was calculated using Cochran's formula with a confidence level of 95%, a margin of error of 5%, and an expected response distribution of 50%. Based on an estimated ICU nurse population of 175, the minimum required sample size was determined to be 120 nurse.

Data Collection Tools:

Data was collected by using self-administrated questionnaire which consists of Two tools:

Tool (1): Nurses' assessment tool, this tool divided into two parts:

Part (1): Nurse's Personal Characteristics: It includes (age, gender, marital status, qualification and years of experience).

Part (2): Nurses' Shift-To-Shift Handover Knowledge Questionnaire : It included (25) multiple-choice questions, This tool was developed by the researcher after reviewing the literature (Jeffery, Mutsch & Knapp, 2014 & Morgan, 2020), the overall purpose of this tool was to assess Nurses' knowledge about shift to shift handover.

Scoring System: Each question was assigned a score of (one) if it was the correct answer and (zero) if it was incorrect answer, the maximum possible total score was twenty-five, Mean and Standard Deviation was calculated and then converted into percent, and then level was determined. Satisfactory knowledge if the total score was 60% or more, unsatisfactory knowledge if the total score was less than 60%.

Tool (2): Nurses' practice Assessment (Observational Checklist): This tool was adopted from (Mohamed, & Abou El-Soud, (2022) and used to assess nurses' practice regarding nursing shift-to-shift handover in ICU, it consists of 8 dimensions as follows:

Identify (5 items), Situation (3 items) and Background (4 items), Patient's and family participation (2 items), Assessment (7 items), Care plan (2 items), Recommendation (3 items), Notes (1 item).

Scoring System: The items had two levels of answers: "done", "not done". These were respectively scored 1 and zero. The scores of the items of each part were summed up and the total divided by the number of items, giving a mean score for the part. These scores were converted to a percent score and computed as adequate performance or inadequate performance. Total score of nurse's performance during shift handover considered "adequate" if the total score was 75% or more, "inadequate" if the total score less than 75%.

Method

The study conducted throughout two main phases: Preparatory phase and data collection phase.

Preparatory Phase:

- An official permission to conduct the study was obtained from the hospital responsible authorities after explanation of the nature and aim of the study.
- This phase took about two months, beginning in September 2024 and ending in December 2024 to finish data collection.

After reviewing the available literatures concerning the topic of the study, Arabic translation of the study tools was done.

Face Validity: of the study tools (knowledge and practice assessment tools) was established through expert review. A panel of five specialists in critical care nursing evaluated the tools for relevance, clarity, and comprehensiveness. Based on their feedback, minor modifications were made to enhance clarity and ensure that the tools accurately reflected the concepts being measured. of the study tools.

Reliability:

The consistency of the developed tool was confirmed using Cronbach's alpha coefficient, indicating its internal reliability. The reliability score of the knowledge questionnaire was 0.78, These values indicate a high level of internal consistency, supporting the use of the tool in assessing critical care nurses' knowledge and practices regarding shift-to-shift handover standards.

Pilot Study:

A pilot study on 12 nurses which represent (10 %) from total study participants working at Assiut University (Main Assiut University Hospital).The

data obtained from the pilot study was analyzed and no changes were done for the study tools.

Ethical Consideration:

Research proposal was approved from Ethical Committee in the faculty of nursing with serial number 1120240856 there is no risk for study nurses during application of the research. The study was following common ethical principles in clinical research. Written consent was obtained from nurses that is willing to participate in the study, after explaining the nature and purpose of the study. Confidentiality and anonymity were assured. Study nurses have the right to refuse to participate and/or withdraw from the study without any rational any time. Study nurses' privacy was considered during collection of data.

Data Collection:

The researcher met with each nurse who participated in the study to explain the purpose of the study and to ask for participation. After obtaining verbal consent, the study tool was handled to the participated nurse to be filling through self-administered questionnaire. To assess gap between nurses' knowledge and practices regarding shift-to-shift handover in intensive care unit regarding nursing shift-to-shift handover in Intensive care unit.

Each participant took about half an hour to fill the questionnaire form. The whole duration for data collection took about four months, beginning in Mid-September 2024 and ending in end-December 2024.

Statistical Design

Data entry and statistical analysis were done using SPSS version 27 (Statistical Package for Social Science). Data were presented as number, percentage, mean, standard deviation. Independent samples t-test was used to compare quantitative variables between groups. Pearson correlation was done to measure correlation between quantitative variables. P-value considered statistically significant when $P \leq 0.05$.

Results

Table (1): Frequency Distribution of Nurses According to Personal Characteristics at Selected Units (N=120).

Personal Characteristics		N	%
Gender	Male	14	11.7
	Female	106	88.3
Age	Under 25 Years	58	48.3
	25-34 Years	60	50.0
	35-44 Years	2	1.7
Mean \pm SD		26.04 \pm 4.11	
Education Qualifications	Diploma in Nursing	76	63.3
	Bachelor Degree in Nursing	28	23.3
	other	16	13.3
Years of Experiences	Less than a years	40	33.3
	1-5 Year	46	38.3
	6_10 Years	24	20.0
	11-15 Year	6	5.0
	16-20 Year	4	3.3
Mean \pm SD		7.38 \pm 5.31	
Marital Status	Single	64	53.3
	Ever Married	56	46.7

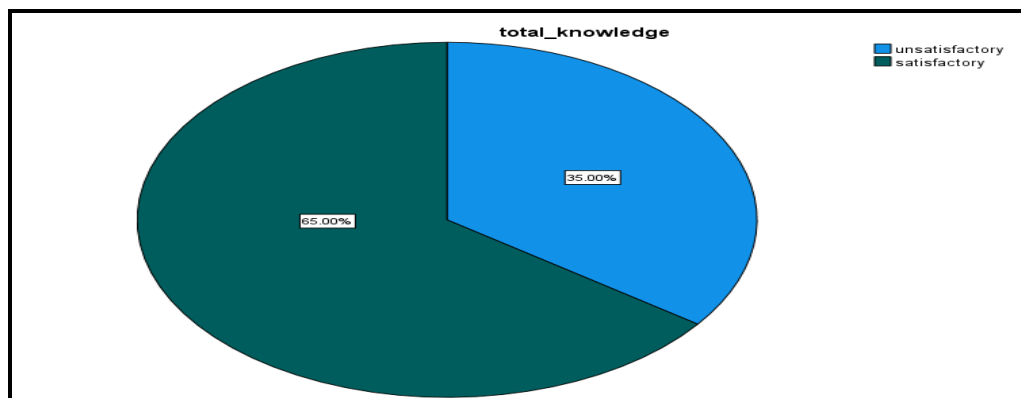


Figure (1): Percentage Distribution of Total Knowledge Level of Nurses Regarding shift-to-shift Handover.

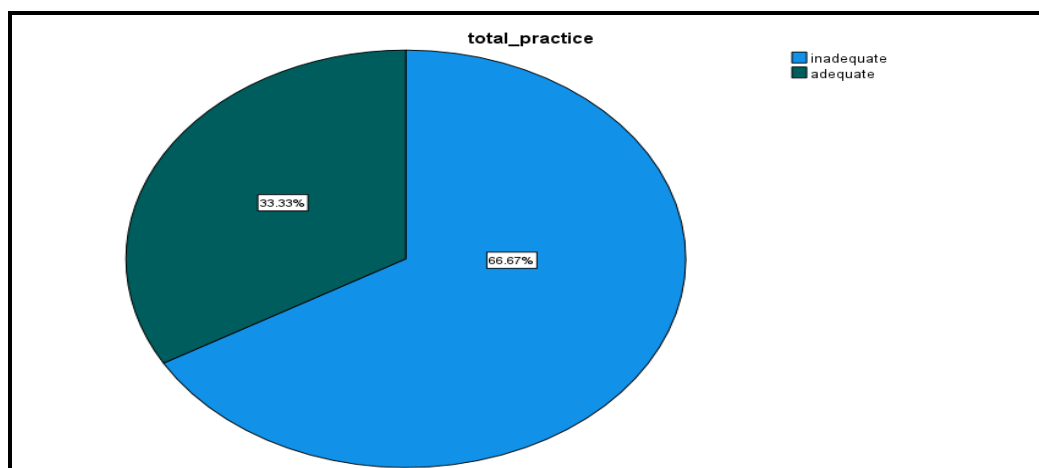


Figure (2): Percentage Distribution of Total Practice Levels among Critical Care Nurses Regarding Shift-to-Shift Handover (N = 120).

Table (2): Correlation Between Nurses' Demographic Characteristics and Their Total Knowledge Scores Regarding Shift-to-Shift Handover (N = 120).

Nurses' Demographic Characteristics	Nurses' Total Knowledge	
Age	R value	-.118
	P value	.198
Gender	R value	.169
	P value	.065
Marital Status	R value	-.049
	P value	.595
Educational	R value	.016
	P value	.865
Experience	R value	-.107
	P value	.246

Table (3): Correlation between Nurses' Demographic Characteristics and Their Total Practice Scores Regarding Shift-to-Shift Handover (N = 120).

Nurses' Demographic Characteristics	Nurses' Total Practice	
Age	R value	-.011
	P value	.904
Gender	R value	-.018
	P value	.842
Marital Status	R value	.189
	P value	.039
Educational	R value	.177
	P value	.054
Experience	R value	.250
	P value	*.006

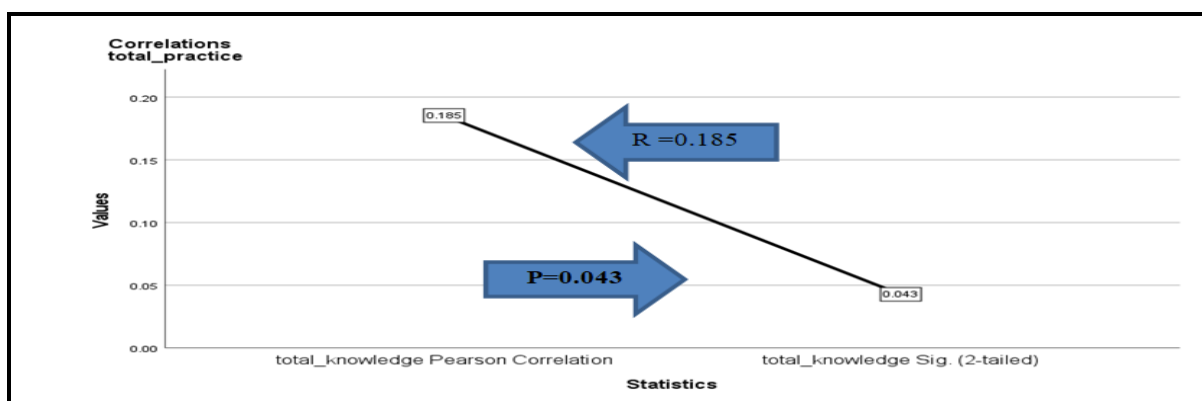
**Figure (3) Correlation between Total Knowledge and Total Practice Scores among Studied Nurses.**

Table (1): The demographic profile of the study sample revealed that the majority of nurses were female (88.3%) and relatively young, with a mean age of 26.04 ± 4.11 years. Most participants held a diploma in nursing (63.3%), and over 70% had less than five years of clinical experience. These findings suggest that the sample largely consisted of early-career nurses with limited practical exposure to critical care environments. While younger nurses may possess stronger theoretical knowledge.

Figure (1): Show that 65% of the nurses demonstrated satisfactory knowledge regarding shift handover standards, while 35% showed unsatisfactory

levels. Although this suggests a generally acceptable level of theoretical awareness, the item-level analysis uncovered specific areas of weakness. Nurses performed well on foundational items such as the purpose of handover, key components, and response to recent changes in patient status, with accuracy rates exceeding 90%. However, performance declined notably in questions related to communication tools like SBAR and I-PASS which stands for Illness Severity, Patient Summary, Action List, Situation Awareness and Contingency Planning, and Synthesis by Receiver, handling miscommunications, and the use of electronic health records during

handovers. Notably, only 11.7% of nurses answered the I-PASS item correctly, and just 45% reported receiving training on handover practices. These findings indicate that while the basic knowledge is present, there is a clear gap in understanding and applying structured handover tools and practices, emphasizing the need for targeted education, regular training sessions, and integration of standardized digital systems to enhance handover safety and efficiency.

Table (2): Shows no significant relationship between nurses' demographic characteristics (age, gender, marital status, education, and years of experience) and their total knowledge scores regarding shift-to-shift handover (p -values > 0.05). This indicates that knowledge levels are not influenced by personal characteristics, suggesting that training and education should target all staff equally, regardless of background.

Figure (2): Reveals that Only 33.3% of nurses showed adequate practice, while 66.7% were inadequate in performing shift handovers. Important steps like involving patients, documenting ICU history, and reporting medications were often missed. This reflects a clear gap between what nurses know and what they actually do, highlighting the need for better training and standardized handover protocols.

Table(3): Presents the Pearson correlation coefficients between nurses' demographic variables and their total practice scores regarding shift-to-shift handover. Among all variables, only years of experience showed a statistically significant positive correlation with practice scores ($r = 0.250$, $p = 0.006$), indicating that more experienced nurses tend to demonstrate better adherence to standard handover practices. Meanwhile, other demographic factors such as age, gender, marital status, and educational level showed no significant correlation ($p > 0.05$), suggesting that these factors do not play a decisive role in determining the quality of handover practices. This highlights the importance of practical exposure and accumulated clinical experience in shaping effective nursing handover behaviors.

Figure (3): Reveals a statistically significant positive correlation between total knowledge and total practice among critical care nurses ($r = 0.185$, $p = 0.043$).

Discussion

Critical care nurses play an essential role in ensuring the safe and effective transition of patient care during shift handovers, particularly for critically ill patients. Accurate, timely, and comprehensive handovers are crucial in minimizing medical errors, improving patient safety, and enhancing continuity of care. Despite its clinical significance, shift handover practices remain inconsistent across institutions and

nurses, often influenced by variations in knowledge, clinical experience, and organizational support.

This chapter aims to assess the gap between knowledge and practice among critical care nurses regarding the basic standards of critically ill patients shift handover

The findings indicate that the majority of participants were female and held a diploma in nursing. Most nurses were young adults, with an average age in the mid-twenties, and had moderate clinical experience, typically between one to five years. Additionally, most were single, which may reflect a workforce still developing in professional maturity. These characteristics emphasize the importance of continuous training and standardized handover protocols to ensure safe and effective communication in critical care units (Ali et al., 2023).

The present study revealed that more than half of ICU nurses had satisfactory knowledge levels regarding basic standards of shift handover. This finding aligns with results from Cairo University (Hassan et al., 2024), which emphasized the importance of academic foundation in enhancing nurses' understanding of structured handover components. Similarly, a study at Assiut University Hospital by Naguib et al. (2023) found that well-designed in-service training improved nurses' recognition of ISBAR communication tools.

Internationally, Harvard Medical School (Peters et al., 2023) highlighted the positive effects of structured simulation-based handover training on knowledge retention, while Tsinghua University in China reported that the majority of participants showed improved knowledge scores following protocol-focused workshops (Li et al., 2023). Moreover, in Germany, Schulz et al. (2024) found that incorporating standardized handover checklists significantly boosted nurses' knowledge accuracy and reduced miscommunication.

A recent study by Yamamoto et al. (2023) in Japan found that although ICU nurses were regularly exposed to complex cases, more than half had limited theoretical knowledge regarding handover protocols. In my opinion, this discrepancy might be attributed to a lack of emphasis on handover content in Japanese nursing curricula, despite the country's advanced clinical technology

The current results showed that only one-third of nurses demonstrated adequate handover practice, indicating a performance gap. This is in agreement with findings by Ain Shams University (Elbaz & Saber, 2023), where only one-third of nurses adhered consistently to structured handover frameworks. A similar trend was observed at Heidelberg University, Germany (Müller et al., 2023), which linked low adherence to poor interdisciplinary communication training.

A multi-center study in China (**Zhang et al., 2022**) revealed that although critical care nurses demonstrated adequate knowledge of handover standards, their actual practices were negatively affected by limited role clarity and high time pressure. These findings reflect a clear gap between what nurses know and what they implement during shift handovers. Similarly, (**Simmons et al. 2024**) from Harvard reported that such discrepancies are often not rooted in knowledge deficits, but rather in systemic and organizational constraints that hinder the practical application of established handover protocols in critical care environments.

However, a study by (**Ahmed et al. 2023**) from Cairo University suggested that most nurses demonstrated excellent handover practices despite moderate knowledge scores. In my opinion, this might reflect the effect of accumulated experience and informal peer learning rather than structured training, which could result in inconsistency and variability in practice quality.

A statistically significant weak positive correlation was found between total knowledge and total practice scores. This suggests that increasing knowledge may lead to improved performance, although other factors likely contribute. This is in line with results from Assiut University (**Youssef et al., 2024**), where nurses who attended educational workshops had both higher knowledge and better handover adherence.

Conversely, a study at Peking University (**Wang et al., 2023**) did not find any significant correlation between knowledge and actual handover behavior. In my opinion, this might be due to cultural hierarchies where junior nurses feel restricted from applying theoretical knowledge if not explicitly endorsed by senior staff.

The current study did not identify any statistically significant correlation between knowledge and age, gender, marital status, education, or years of experience. This agrees with the findings of (**Ali et al. 2024**) from Ain Shams University, who reported that knowledge scores were uniformly distributed across demographic subgroups due to standardized training exposure.

However, practice scores showed significant correlations with marital status, indicating that experienced and possibly more stable staff performed better during handover. A study from Harvard's School of Public Health (**Nelson et al., 2022**) supports this, showing experienced ICU nurses demonstrated better adherence to shift documentation protocols.

A contradictory result was reported by (**Hoffmann et al. 2023**) in Germany, where no demographic factors predicted better performance. In my opinion, this might be due to the uniform culture of accountability and rigorous documentation systems in German

ICUs, which standardize behavior regardless of personal characteristics.

Conclusion

The study concluded that there is a clear gap between nurses' knowledge and their actual practice in shift handovers. Most individual practice items scored below satisfactory levels, with several critical procedures not routinely performed. Demographic variables showed no significant correlation with knowledge, and only years of experience had a modest positive correlation with practice .

Recommendations

The researchers recommended the following:

1. Conduct a training program within the daily workflow of critical care units.
2. Develop a simulation-based training program, shadowing experienced nurses during real-time handovers, and using case-based scenarios during shift meetings can greatly enhance nurses' confidence and application of standardized communication tools such as ISBAR.
3. Nursing education program should incorporate practical handover training into their curricula.

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