

Table of Contents

- What Is a Warm Handoff?..... 1
- Why Use Warm Handoffs? 1
- Tools for Warm Handoffs..... 2
- Resources Needed To Implement Warm Handoffs..... 4
- Implementing Warm Handoffs..... 5
 - Step 1. Obtain leadership buy-in, and identify a champion 5
 - Step 2. Design work flows that allow warm handoffs..... 5
 - Step 3. Train team members in warm handoffs and in the adjusted work flows 5
 - Step 4. Make patients and families aware of warm handoffs..... 6
 - Step 5. Evaluate and refine your process..... 6
- References 7



What Is a Warm Handoff?

In this strategy, a warm handoff is a handoff that is conducted in person, between two members of the health care team, in front of the patient (and family if present). It includes the patient as a team member so that he or she can hear what is being discussed about the clinical problem, current status, and plan of care.

The term “warm handoff” originated in customer service where it is used to describe referrals that ensure that the customer is connected to someone who can provide what he or she needs. In health care, this typically means that one member of the health care team introduces another team member to the patient, explaining why the other team member can better address a specific issue with the patient and emphasizing the other team member’s competence.¹ Often it is used to describe the handoff between a medical provider and a behavioral health specialist.

In this strategy, the emphasis of the warm handoff is specifically on engaging the patient and family in the handoff within the primary care practice. A warm handoff can occur between any two members of the health care team, including clinicians, medical assistants, front and back office staff, and members of the extended care team (e.g., pharmacist, diabetic nurse educator, social worker).

Why Use Warm Handoffs?

Warm handoffs engage the patient and are a safety check. Communication breakdowns within the health care team or between the team and the patient or family can result in medical errors.²⁻⁴ Research demonstrates that reliable and effective communication is essential for patient safety and improved clinical outcomes.⁵⁻⁷ Successful handoffs among clinical staff require open communication and teamwork.⁸

Warm Handoff in Action

At a primary care practice in Wisconsin, a medical assistant brought the patient to the exam room and started taking

For Practice Staff and Clinicians

f **Time.** Depending on your practice, additional staff time may be needed to accommodate the changes in workflow necessary to allow two members of the health care team to communicate in person with the patient present. However, you should be able to redesign the workflow so that additional time is not required from the clinician.

Implementing Warm Handoffs

Specific implementation of warm handoffs will depend on your practice's individual characteristics and current workflow. In many practices, standard workflow in the practice will need to be adjusted.

The following steps are recommended but may be adapted for your practice's individual structure and processes.

Step 1. Obtain leadership buy-in, and identify a champion.

Strong leadership and staff engagement are important to successful implementation. Identifying a champion within your practice can help guide you in implementing and refining the use of warm handoffs.

Step 2. Design workflows that allow warm handoffs.

Collaborate with all clinicians and staff within your practice to design workflows that include warm handoffs. The **Design Guide for Implementing Warm Handoffs** is available to assist you in redesigning your practice's workflow to accommodate a warm handoff.

Step 3. Train team members in warm handoffs and in the adjusted workflows.

Spread the word across the team about warm handoffs. You can use your existing approaches to inform your team, such as

huddles, staff meetings, formal training, or direct supervision. A video is available to explain the concept and the process of warm handoffs and to demonstrate an exemplar warm handoff. Encourage team members to role play and rehearse warm handoffs to become comfortable with them.

Make your team aware of your goals for warm handoffs, and train them in any new work flows. Make sure they understand their roles in supporting warm handoffs.

Step 4. Make patients and families aware of warm handoffs.

A patient fact sheet is provided to help you inform your patients and their families about warm handoffs. Make the patient fact sheet easily accessible throughout the practice. You can print and distribute it to patients and families and display it strategically in the office.

Talk with patients and families about the value of warm handoffs and why they are being used. Answer any questions your patients and families have. An example script is also provided to aid in informing patients and families about this new approach to team-based care.

Step 5. Evaluate and refine your process.

Assess how warm handoffs are being used. Refine the workflow design as the team becomes more comfortable with warm handoffs or as any issues arise. Continue to identify and address any barriers to using warm handoffs.

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