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## Distractions in the Operating Room (OR): An Emerging Threat to Patient Safety.

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Sir,

The operating room (OR) is a highly complex and dynamic environment where constant vigilance, situational awareness, and effective teamwork are crucial to ensure patient safety. Despite this, anaesthesia providers frequently encounter distractions that can divert attention from critical patient care tasks.

Distractions in the OR arise from a variety of sources — auditory stimuli, personnel movement, alarms, and personal electronic devices (PEDs) — and can significantly affect cognitive performance. They increase workload, impair attention, and elevate the risk of human error.

The American Society of Anesthesiologists (ASA) emphasizes minimizing distractions in the anaesthesia work environment as a key component of patient safety. Frequent interruptions reduce situational awareness, delay response times, and can compromise decision-making<sup>1</sup>.

Distractions can be classified as auditory, visual, equipment-related, or personal. While some (like teaching discussions or case-relevant communication) may be beneficial, most non-essential

interruptions are detrimental. Of particular concern is PED use, which, though beneficial for accessing data and drug references, poses a real risk of distraction and privacy breaches<sup>2</sup>.

Borrowing from aviation, the “Sterile Cockpit Rule” —prohibiting non-essential activities during critical flight phases—can be adapted to the OR as a “Sterile OR Rule.” Applying this during induction, airway management, or emergence could substantially reduce preventable errors<sup>3</sup>.

Other practical strategies include environmental noise control, customized alarm settings, simulation-based training to handle interruptions, and institutional policies regulating PED use. Team briefings emphasizing focus during critical periods can further strengthen safety culture.

In conclusion, distractions in the operating room represent an under-recognized but preventable threat to patient safety. A structured approach emphasizing situational awareness, controlled communication, and judicious use of technology can help foster a mindful, distraction-free anaesthesia practice.

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