Communication is paramount when it comes to patient care. If there is breakdown of communication at any level, the probability of preventable harm to the patient increases. As a recent medical school graduate I could conceptualize easily the importance of accurate information exchange. It was only when a scrub tech in the OR handed the operating surgeon the wrong size screw that I observed first hand how small lapses in communication can be detrimental for the patients involved. After the surgeon had placed multiple screws into a surgical plate, correcting a fracture, an x-ray revealed that the screws were too long by a few millimeters. The disappointed surgeon proceeded to correct all of the screws that were too long which resulted in a longer operating time, unnecessary scheduled conflicts and the patient remained under anesthesia for a longer than anticipated amount of time. When the surgeon asked the scrub tech what happened the tech thought he had given the surgeon the appropriate length screw, even going so far as to state, “a few millimeters too long, what is the big deal?” At that point the surgeon, now visibly frustrated, stated that after the case he would like to speak with the tech, the resident, the circulating nurse and myself. At the time I thought that this would be a waste of my time with such a simple mistake being made. However the surgeon’s talk turned out to be one of the most educational lessons I have ever had on patient safety.

After the patient had left the room the surgeon educated us on proper communication inside the operating room. Specifically he addressed the importance of closed loop communication. Closed loop communication can be defined as an automatic control system that operates on recycled input in which communication is conveyed from one point to another enabling both parties to send and receive information with immediate feedback. This form of communication has multiple benefits. In an operating room setting, one benefit is that the party receiving the request for a tool will more than likely obtain the correct item. Another benefit is that the individual sending the information is able to immediately verify the comprehension of the instruction delivered to the recipient. The last benefit is that closed loop communication decreases ambiguity between individuals so the correct item or medication can be delivered thus improving patient safety and decreasing the risk of preventable harm inflicted on the patient.

Closed loop communication can be applied in multiple settings, when a physician asks for a medication from a nurse or pharmacist, when a nurse tells a medical technician how to change a dressing, or when a patient tells a physician what their wishes for treatment are. This type of communication is employed in various industries to decrease the probability of errors occurring. In the airline industry when the tower talks to pilots every form of communication is closed loop communication. The military has long utilized this type of communication when orders are given to subordinates. The medical, airline, and military industries are only a few fields in which errors must be mitigated due to the high-risk nature of these occupations and closed loop communication is just one quick, cost effective way to do this.

After the talk that the surgeon had delivered, I saw the next few cases in which the same team operated and utilized closed loop communication. In my opinion, the cases went a lot smoother. The correct instruments were passed, the correct screws were applied, and the cases were much shorter than the previous case which all translated into better patient care. As I learn more responsibility in my medical career I will employ closed loop communication to decrease medical errors and improve patient care.