When asked who they might go to in the hospital with a question, University of Utah medical students had a surprising answer.

“It came down to, ‘I don’t always know who to ask and I’m afraid of the response I’m going to get,’” said Ruth Braga, MSN, who led the survey.

When Braga conducted the initial survey in 2013, nurses were near the bottom of the list for the students, who feared being criticized or belittled for their questions. Once questions are met with criticism, the chance of asking a future question drops significantly, explained Braga.

So she spearheaded a strategy to change the culture creating an “ASK ME” sticker now worn by about 200 hospital staff.

Students or staff who don’t speak up or ask questions not only miss out on learning opportunities, but they put patients at risk. At other institutions, situations have occurred where medical students noticed problems but were afraid to speak up — leading to patient injury and in some cases death.

In 2009 the Joint Commission issued Sentinel Event Alert #40 stating that disruptive and intimidating behavior contributes to errors and patient safety issues.

“We wanted to find a way for everybody to speak up regardless of how much courage they had or what their position was,” Braga said.

The sticker plan initially came to life in 2013 in a two-year pilot project involving hundreds of participants including nurses, CNAs, secretaries and administrative staff. Braga trained medical students and staff to look for the stickers. Awareness grew about the need to communicate.

In 2017, Braga was awarded seed funding from Imagine Perfect Care to help pay for the ASK ME logo design, stickers and training materials. Intense data collection is underway to examine the program impact. The goal, said Braga, is to take it to other institutions.

“We want this to be a University Health, IPC-born project that we can launch,” said the nurse, who received the Surgical Education Research Fellowship from the Association for Surgical Education. Braga will present the original data at a conference this spring in addition to information collected in the last few months.
ASK ME is an acronym, encouraging and reminding staff and students to:

A nswer and ask questions
S peak up and stop poor behavior
K is a reminder to use kindness
M ake room for others to learn, and
E is for eliminate errors.

Participation by staff is voluntary and medical students are receiving training now. The goal was to have a significant number of staff trained before students to make the program run more smoothly.

Research shows that employees who are happy and supported do a better job at work, said Amalia Cochran, a surgeon and Vice Chair of Education and Professionalism for the Department of Surgery, who has collaborated with Braga.

“So if people are working in a place where they don’t have a sense of psychological safety as a learner, as a new nurse or even a senior nurse in the midst of something complicated, then they’re not going to be able to do the best thing for the patient and their family,” she said. “I think ASK ME is a great model program for trying to create a kind and collaborative environment for learning.”

ASK ME is available to all hospital staff and medical students. If you would like to learn more about this initiative or find out how your unit can participate, please contact Ruth Braga via email: ruth.braga@hsc.utah.edu.

By Julia Lyon