

# Brief History of Nurse Call

The nurse call system as it is known today is vastly different from its origins. In its most simple form, a nurse call system consists of a push button in the patient room, a light above the patient door and a central location (usually a nurses station) where calls can be viewed. With advances in technology, and the ever-changing model of healthcare, the modern nurse call system took several forms over its century-long history.

The earliest version of an alerting system for nursing care was adapted from the bell systems for servants in affluent homes. Florence Nightingale, at the forefront of modern nursing techniques, took notice of the system and applied it to her caring environment. She later remarked during her discussion of hospital requirements that, "Without a system of this kind, a nurse is converted to a pair of legs." <sup>1</sup> Over time, this system evolved into hand bells that patients would ring at their bed side, leading to the term "call bell system" that is still used today.

As hospitals became larger and traditional wards were transformed into one or two bed patient rooms, healthcare facilities needed a different system by which a patient could contact a nurse. As technology evolved, this necessary patient to staff contact was accomplished through a light (visual) and tone (sound) notification system.

During the 1980s, two-way audio became a more widely represented feature. Nurses could then communicate with the patient in their room to determine exactly what needs the patient had before responding to the call.

One of the biggest changes to nurse call came with the invention of the IP-based system. IP technology allows the nurse call system to integrate with other platforms, such as fire alarm, wander management and security systems. Since that implementation, nurse call systems have grown more and more advanced, opening the ultimate communication path between patients and staff.

As technology continues to evolve, wireless nurse call systems are becoming more and more commonplace. Healthcare facilities are beginning to build their IT infrastructure around wireless networks, leading to high demand for all things wireless. As the trend continues, nurse call manufacturers are stepping up to provide wireless systems that provide the same capabilities as their IP-based counterparts.



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— Florence Nightingale

Since their first introduction, nurse call systems have gravitated from a luxury accessory to a compulsory tool in the healthcare workplace.

Today, all state hospital building codes require hospitals to have, at a minimum, a light and tone nurse call system. With this said, the nurse call business is a code driven industry and strictly mandated. However, this requirement, eventually, brought with it other standards to be met.

To provide protection for the employees of healthcare facilities, OSHA (The Occupational Safety and Hazard Administration), a federally mandated organization, requires that all nurse call systems be tested by a Nationally Recognized Testing Lab (NRTL). Underwriters Laboratory is one such lab, and nurse call systems which pass their certification process receive UL® 1069 listing (UL 1069 is the specific listing for nurse call equipment). In addition, nurse call systems must meet the American with Disabilities Act (ADA) maximum and minimum height requirements as it pertains to some of the required components of a nurse call system.

Furthermore, the Joint Commission of Hospitals (JCH), a hospital self-governing association, is responsible for a nationally recognized hospital accreditation process. The JCH focuses its accreditation standards on functions and aspects of patient care that are essential to a facility achieving quality patient care and a safe care environment. In essence, the JCH seeks to accredit only those facilities that aim to improve patient care.

Today's system is a necessary component of a facility's healthcare environment, which must also meet federally established safety standards. As hospitals seek accreditation from the JCH, the nurse call system can also be an essential tool in helping to provide quality patient care.

<sup>1</sup> Vicinus, Martha. *Ever Yours, Florence Nightingale: Selected Letters*. Harvard University Press, 1990.

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