

Not so tall tales of an OR Manager: Surviving a catastrophic snowstorm, a pandemic, and a cyberattack while leading an operating room

Jennifer Sutton

As an Operating Room (OR) Manager, I am no stranger to the unexpected, but my first years of management threw me one challenge after another! A catastrophic snowstorm (affectionately or unaffectionately named “Snowmagedden” by the people of Newfoundland and Labrador) was just the beginning, followed by the global COVID-19 pandemic and then a crippling cyberattack. These crises tested my leadership, the perioperative team’s resilience, and my hospital’s capacity to continue providing essential care for our most vulnerable. But through it all, the strength and dedication of “my” Operating Room staff and team was calm during the storm(s).

The Snowstorm: Paralyzing the Peninsula

It all started with a snowstorm—an extreme weather event that brought the Avalon Peninsula and my city of St. John’s to an absolute standstill. The roads were treacherous, rendering travel nearly impossible for hospital staff. But many surgeries simply could not be paused, especially for critical and emergency cases. As the Perioperative Manager, I had to ensure that the operating rooms remained functional despite limited staff availability, emergency power, and the province calling a state of emergency – I was weeks into this role, having left the front line only 5 weeks prior. I relied on the experience of my staff and mentors to help navigate through. An emergency operations centre (EOC) was established early in the morning, and from there contingency plans were quickly set in motion. Those who could make it to the hospital ended up staying overnight (some for 2–3 days) sleeping on makeshift beds in break rooms and empty patient areas. Staff worked around the clock, pulling double shifts. Everyone stepped up, doing whatever it took to keep the hospital functional and to maintain service for emergencies. The biggest challenge during the storm wasn’t just maintaining operations but keeping morale high as exhaustion set in.

Throughout those days, I saw firsthand the dedication of my team. The entire hospital leaned on each other, with OR nurses helping acute care floor nurses, administrative staff serving meals and washing dishes, personal care attendants going around the hospital helping wherever necessary, food service staff working throughout the day and night to feed nearly 1,000 people that were stranded and unable to leave the hospitals. There was a “pizza party” where the staff from the OR helped ensure there was enough food prepared for everyone. The second morning, there were many stories of on-call staff

snowshoeing from their homes to the hospital to relieve their tired colleagues. It was a powerful reminder that leadership in a crisis isn’t just about directing operations—it’s about making sure the team feels supported, both physically and emotionally. By the time the snow began to slow, and conditions improved, the team had proven its resilience.

The Pandemic: An Unimaginable Crisis

We were barely recovered from Snowmagedden when the entire world was hit with an unimaginable crisis: COVID-19. The pandemic completely upended how we operated in the OR. Elective surgeries were canceled, and only the most urgent cases were prioritized. My role shifted from focusing on operations to ensuring staff safety, managing resources like personal protective equipment (PPE), and constantly updating protocols to minimize the risk of infection.

The unknowns of the virus were terrifying for everyone, but especially for frontline healthcare workers. As a leader, it was critical to provide not only clear direction but support. I began holding daily huddles and end-of-week updates, not just to share new information but to check in on the staff’s well-being. Their concerns ranged from the adequacy of PPE to the risk of bringing the virus home to their families. Listening became just as important as leading the team. Being a new manager, this was something that I had to learn quickly, and I was very grateful for mentors within the perioperative environment that helped me understand the importance of providing this support to staff (and my team giving me grace to learn during this chaotic time – it was a humbling and profound experience).

The OR became a tense, high-stakes environment. We had to treat COVID-positive patients in emergency situations while protecting the health of our team. The staff worked through long hours, fully suited in PPE, sometimes without a break. It wasn’t easy, but the pandemic further solidified the bond we had built during the snowstorm. We leaned on one another, knowing that teamwork was the only way we would get through this. Operating room staff had to learn new skills – being deployed to vaccine clinics and respiratory swab drive-through clinics – and through it all the team stuck together and prevailed. I was and am forever proud of the way the perioperative staff jumped into the unknown and faced challenges with a smile and with true courage.

The Cyberattack: Testing Our Resilience (and Patience)

Just when we thought the worst was over, a cyberattack hit, taking down our hospital's network systems. Suddenly, we lost access to essential electronic systems—patient records, surgical schedules, everything. It was as though we were thrust back into the pre-digital era, forced to rely on manual documentation and paper charts. I got a phone call at 7am on a Sunday morning telling me our systems were down. I admit that I thought “what else can go wrong”.... But, just like before, the team was up for the challenge.

Continuing surgeries without our digital tools was difficult. We quickly established temporary communication channels and relied on phone calls to coordinate between departments. The OR staff's adaptability was crucial during this time. Despite the setback, they adjusted quickly to the new, manual processes, ensuring that patient care remained largely uninterrupted and essential surgeries were completed in a timely fashion.

Lessons in Leadership

Reflecting on these events, surviving the snowstorm, the pandemic, and the cyberattack made me realize that leading an OR isn't just about managing schedules and supplies. It's about fostering a culture of adaptability, trust, and collaboration

within your team. Each crisis pushed us to our limits, but it also brought us closer together.

In each situation, the OR staff demonstrated extraordinary commitment and courage. They taught me that in times of crisis, leadership is about more than just managing—it's about supporting your team, leading with compassion, being willing to adapt, but mostly, it's about showing up for them when they need it.

Ultimately, the challenges we faced weren't just obstacles—they were opportunities to grow, strengthen our team, and reaffirm our dedication to patient care, no matter what comes our way. I'm proud to say we “weathered” all storms. It showed the true resilience of perioperative staff and that teamwork is essential in daily work and times of crisis alike.

Jennifer Sutton is a Perioperative Nursing Administrative Leader working in Newfoundland, Canada. She holds a Masters of Nursing Education and is currently working on a Post-Master's Nurse Practitioner Degree. Jennifer has worked in perioperative practice since 2016 and sits on the ORNAC Board of Directors as the Secretary.

Program Approvals

Congratulations to George Brown College AND MacEwan University!

We proudly announce that George Brown College and MacEwan University have successfully renewed their perioperative nursing program approvals with ORNAC!

These approvals reflect the dedication to excellence in perioperative nursing education, aligning with ORNAC's core values and philosophical framework for Registered Nurses in the perioperative setting.

Together, we continue to advance the future of nursing by ensuring high standards in education and practice. Here's to the next generation of skilled perioperative nurses!

Félicitation au Collège George Brown et à l'Université MacEwan!

Nous sommes fiers d'annoncer que le Collège Georges Brown et l'Université MacEwan a renouvelé avec succès l'approbation de leurs programmes de soins infirmiers périopératoires auprès de l'AIISOC !

Ces approbations reflètent le dévouement à l'excellence dans la formation des soins infirmiers périopératoires, conformément aux valeurs fondamentales et au cadre philosophique de l'AIISOC pour les infirmières en milieu périopératoire.

Ensemble, nous continuons à faire progresser l'avenir des soins infirmiers en assurant des normes élevées dans la formation et la pratique. À la prochaine génération d'infirmières en soins périopératoires !