Caring for a patient’s skin is primarily a nursing responsibility. Skin breakdown from pressure is associated with increased mortality, increased costs, and longer length of stay.

A nursing initiative to decrease the incidence of hospital-acquired pressure ulcers and improve the quality of skin care was implemented.

The surgical intensive care unit (SICU) is located in a large university-based teaching hospital. Types of patients include:
- Open heart surgery
- Peripheral vascular and thoracic surgery
- Transplants – liver, kidney, and heart
- General surgery
- Ear, nose, and throat surgery
- High acuity including left-ventricular assist devices, intra-aortic balloon pumps, etc.
- 24 beds plus 6 intermediate care beds

Analysis of Braden\(^1\) scores demonstrated that the mean Braden score in the SICU was 11.35, indicating that these patients are at high risk for developing pressure ulcers. Contributing factors include:
- Long operating room times
- Poor nutrition and perfusion
- Fecal incontinence
- Inability to turn hemodynamically unstable or fresh graft patients

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Skin Improvement Initiatives

In January of 2007, SICU management collaborated with the Wound Ostomy Care Nurse to create an SICU Skin Care Committee:

- RNs were educated on skin assessment
- Protocols were developed for data collection
- Preventative skin care was evaluated

To improve accuracy of data collection, committee members also completed an online course on pressure ulcer surveillance.

Monthly data collection of pressure ulcer incidence with quarterly submission to National Database of Nursing Quality Indicators (NDNQI) has provided benchmarks to assess outcomes.

Changes in the SICU

- Implemented low air loss mattresses* for all patients
- Increased skin committee membership
- Posted skin and wound care guidelines at all bedsides
- Provided staff education on risk assessment, preventative skin care, wound care, and resources for consultation
- A turning team was started on the night shift to turn and position patients every 2 hours and the charge nurse performed weekly audits on skin care documentation

* InTouch™ Bed with PositionPRO® Support Surface (Stryker Inc, Kalamazoo, MI)

Audits showed improvement in the identification of patients at risk for developing pressure ulcers as well as appropriate prevention and treatment. Although most patients in the SICU are at risk for developing pressure ulcers, the incidence has gone from 37% in February 2007 to 0% in February 2008.

The SICU Skin Care Team initiative has and will continue to improve skin and wound care for these high-risk, critically-ill patients.