Patient handoff is a critically important process in healthcare. However, there have been few studies investigating healthcare staff perceptions of its quality and safety. In the present paper, we seek to explore essential characteristics of patient handoff. We discuss critical factors and strategies contributing to effective handoffs. A questionnaire survey was conducted in 2011, collecting 1462 valid responses (74% response rate) from nurses in six Japanese hospitals. There were 17 questions, each with reply options on a five-point Likert scale, covering five main aspects: information transfer, responsibility transfer, management goals, environment and handoff system. As an overall trend, Japanese nurses indicated that both information and responsibility for the patient were transferred moderately well within the hospital. They put a higher priority on the goal of patient safety and a relatively smaller on efficiency. Most respondents viewed their hospital's handoff system as immature. Significant differences were observed in nurses' perceptions not only across hospitals but also across wards/departments. In particular, during patient handoffs between different units, nurses working in intensive care unit, emergency department, operating room and the outpatient clinic showed significantly stronger awareness of different views of relevant information from other units, but more positive views of voicing their concerns during handoffs than inpatient ward nurses. The longer their working years in their current work unit and the longer their cumulative experience, the more positive was nurses' perceptions of patient handoffs within their hospital. According to respondents, patient information was transferred significantly more sufficiently between shifts than between different units. We would suggest improvement of handoff system, e.g., implementing IT systems, and appropriate guidelines, as well as its training for safer patient handoffs in Japanese hospitals. Copyright © (2012) by IAPSAM & ESRA.