Six Steps to a Safer Workforce

Building Accountability as an Essential Element for Injury Prevention in the Health Care Industry
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Safety is Job 1 for Every Health Care Professional

At a time when experienced professionals are in short supply and budgets are under enormous pressure, health care facilities need to optimize the productivity of their staffs and keep their employees safe and healthy while reducing unnecessary costs. And yet, in the health care field, practices exist that lead to preventable injuries and illnesses. Often, health care providers may have safety programs in place. But they sometimes fall short in ensuring that managers and employees are fully accountable for their adherence to the organization's safety protocols. A formal, well-managed and well-communicated safety program, combined with a zero-tolerance policy for violations, can significantly reduce the number of incidents and increase overall productivity. In this white paper, we will explore the factors that have made accountability for safety so critical to long-term success in health care facilities, and offer recommendations on how health care facilities can plan and implement best practices that hold professionals accountable for workplace safety.

A Hazardous Profession

Statistically, health care is one of America's most hazardous professions. According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS), in 2006, nursing aides, orderlies, and attendants reported the highest incidence rate of any occupations in the category of musculoskeletal disorders (MSD) requiring days away from work (BLS, 2007). The BLS also reports that, as of 2005, this group experienced the highest overall rate of nonfatal injuries and illnesses, with 543.4 per 10,000 full-time workers. The next closest occupation was construction laborers. Among the most common causes of injury were patient handling and movement tasks—both of which can be reduced, if not eliminated, through proper training and communication, the use of appropriate equipment, and strict enforcement of best-practice protocols.

AN UNSUSTAINABLE TREND

Safety hazards are taking professionals out of the workforce at a time when our nation faces a critical shortage of skilled personnel. According to the American Hospital Association (AHA), roughly 13% of U.S. nursing positions go unfilled. That rate is expected to climb to 20% by 2015. As a result, the AHA projects that by 2020, the U.S. will face a shortage of more than 400,000 RNs. To offset this shortfall, the Agency for Healthcare Research & Quality estimates that enrollment in nursing education programs would need to immediately increase by 40%—an unlikely outcome when enrollment has been declining since 1995. In such an environment, the health care industry cannot afford to lose valuable professionals to injuries and illness—whether short-term or long-term. Given this trend, there is a real need for health care facilities to improve safety policies and practices. And one of the most effective tools for doing so is to make health care employees and their immediate managers accountable for safety.

“Accountability breeds response-ability.”
- Stephen R. Covey
WHAT IS ACCOUNTABILITY?
Accountability may be defined as an activity, practice or issue for which a party can legitimately be held responsible and called on to justify or change. A given party may be accountable for themselves, their peers or subordinates.

For nursing professionals, accountability has been further defined as “the obligation of being answerable for one’s own judgments and actions to an appropriate person or authority recognized as having the right to demand information and explanation, according to the terms of reference of the NMC Code of Professional Conduct.”

In the workplace, there are three types of accountability:
1. Personal accountability
2. Peer accountability
3. Management accountability

In an ideal workplace environment, each party can and should hold each other party accountable. Accountability is an obligation or willingness to accept responsibility that managers should embrace. It goes beyond performing the tasks assigned to given roles, and involves ensuring that everyone is also performing those roles safely. In a workplace with high safety accountability, employees and managers are more vigilant in seeking opportunities to improve processes in order to increase safety. Real-time intervention and safety committee reviews of accidents and injuries can help employees and managers prevent injuries and learn from the ones that do occur.

Six Recommendations for a More Accountable Workforce
PMA Companies has studied health care workplaces nationwide for decades and, based on that experience, offers the following recommendations for designing and implementing an effective program of accountability:

1. Create an Environment of Safety
Accountability for safety requires an environment where employees want to be safe because it’s the right thing to do. The process begins with top management, which must focus on actions, not just words. Employees observe and emulate their supervisors. Therefore, managers at every level must not create an impression of, “Do as I say not as I do,” but rather, “Do as I say AND as I do.”

Elements of a Well-Managed Safety Program

1. Commitment from senior management
2. Active implementation of a formal safety program led by mid-level management (such as nurse managers)
3. Employee involvement and practice through example and demonstration, not directives

Accountability is also a fundamental aspect of overall professionalism. At work, professionalism refers to doing one’s job and being accountable for the workplace. It leads to logical and unbiased decision-making, and is the foundation of a productive work environment.
2 Demonstrate Your Commitment

Health care facilities need to not only have safety policies in place, but should also consider implementing a zero-tolerance policy for violations. Employers must create a system of accountability for safety that includes:

- Strong policy
- Documentation
- Thorough training and communication
- Accountability to follow through with safety rules

Health care operations that demonstrate a strong baseline safety program led by mid-level supervision and employee participation frequently see a direct result in the form of fewer injuries, lower costs and higher productivity.

3 Focus on Unit Managers

In most health care organizations, mid-managers, such as nurse managers and clinical directors, are responsible for the day-to-day operations of their units. This includes responsibility for creating and sustaining a culture of safety. If a mid-manager allows employees to bypass or overlook safety rules, there may be a higher rate of injury. For example, if the mid-manager fails to implement a formal system to enforce a safety program, or fails to address those who violate safety rules, employees may be more likely to take shortcuts that undermine safety.

Therefore, to be successful, any safety program must include full buy-in and participation by all mid-managers. The program should help make adhering to safety practices a natural course of performing tasks. And, the program should not only address unsafe employee behaviors and actions, but also the actions of mid-managers who fail to embrace and enforce the spirit and letter of the program’s policies.

4 Give Managers Authority

If mid-managers are to be held accountable for their units, they need to be granted an appropriate level of authority. This authority can be as simple as control of the staffing schedule—such as determining the length of staff member shifts. Or, it may involve the ability to make broader changes within their units, such as switching beds, making purchases, or relocating supplies—without permission from top managers. With accountability for safety must come authority, so that mid-managers can take action to improve how their units operate.

5 Measure Safety

It is often said that what can be measured can be managed. And safety is no exception. Health care institutions should support accountability-driven leadership built on strong, reliable loss trend data, so that the rate and severity of employee injuries can be measured. From this data, the organization should set goals for each unit, and all managers and employees should be responsible for meeting those goals.

For example, overall industry data indicates that the most frequent employee injury occurs during the transfer of patients. With that in mind, all managers and employees should be made aware of this trend and receive proper training in patient handling to ensure that they can be held accountable for performing this task as safely as possible.

Mid-managers are the best-positioned to drive cultural change. Therefore, they should be provided with loss data on daily tasks in their units, and given responsibility for ensuring continued improvements in safety.

6 Encourage Safety-Minded Decisions

Theodore Roosevelt once said, “In any moment of decision the best thing you can do is the right thing, the next best thing is the wrong thing, and the worst thing you can do is nothing.” In health care, professionals generally do not have the option to do nothing. However, there are usually several ways to complete a task, so employees must quickly decide which way is best. In high-pressure situations, the choice too often comes down to “just do it.” This removes accountability because the primary concern is speed. When employees are trained to identify the safest solution, and are held accountable for doing so, good decisions become part of their natural course when performing tasks.
Conclusion: Patient Safety = Employee Safety = Greater Success

The benefits of greater employee safety can be profound. Studies show that employee satisfaction increases and employee turnover decreases when organizations are committed to providing a safe work environment. What's more, health care facilities need to recognize that patient safety and employee safety go hand-in-hand, and should share the same level of importance. For instance, when patient handling procedures are designed for optimal patient safety, they are also safer for the employees who implement them.

A formal employee safety program that includes top-management buy-in, along with accountability at every level, is essential to a health care organization's overall success. And it can help individual facilities—as well as the overall industry—optimize the productivity of their staffs, keep employees safe and healthy, reduce unnecessary costs, and potentially lessen the impact of critical workforce shortages in the years ahead.

About the Authors

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About PMA Companies

PMA Companies (www.pmacompanies.com) provides risk management solutions and services, specializing in workers’ compensation and offering property and casualty insurance, in the U.S.

Headquartered in Blue Bell, PA, PMA Companies is a member of Old Republic Companies. Old Republic International Corporation (NYSE: ORI) is one of the nation’s 50 largest publicly held insurance organizations.

PMA Management Corp., one of the PMA Companies, provides results-driven claims and risk management service solutions to clients in a broad range of programs, including individual self-insurance, self-insured groups, captives and unbundled insurance programs. PMA Management Corp., which has consistently received SAS 70 (type 2) reports with an unqualified auditor’s opinion, is currently celebrating 20 years of consistent annual growth and expansion.

How to Put Accountability into Practice

To ensure the effectiveness of an organization’s accountability measures, the U.S. Office of Personnel Management recommends that managers:

1. Involve employees in setting clear, challenging, yet attainable goals and objectives, and give them the authority to accomplish those goals
2. Coach employees when they request help, and support employees in all aspects of the job
3. Monitor progress toward goals, and provide feedback that includes credible, useful performance measures
4. Provide the training and resources employees need to do the work
5. Recognize employees for good performance, both formally and informally