STAFF EDUCATION AS A WISE INVESTMENT

The Medical Protective Company

Success Requires a Team Effort

Employment experts tell us that businesses rise or fall based on the quality of their employees. This is likely true in a clinical environment as in any other business venture.

Risk analysis of closed surgical malpractice claims supports the contention that the overall healthcare team has a direct impact on patient safety and satisfaction. When employees feel that they are valued for their contributions to the practice, they are often more likely to invest themselves in the organization's success, which includes maintaining patient safety and satisfaction.

So, it is fair to assume that medical practices that invest in team building are likely to have lower rates of employee turnover. And, just as in any successful organization, having an experienced team in a medical practice reduces the risks of error and patient dissatisfaction.

Find Ways To Be a Learning Organization

Just as healthcare providers are encouraged to conduct risk management analyses of their practices, it also makes sense to conduct educational assessments to identify: (a) gaps in communication, (b) policies that should be revamped or reinforced, and (c) opportunities for education about new topics or issues (as well as re-education about subjects that have already been addressed in new employee training or in-service updates).

Practices should have formal training programs for new employees that tie into their written job descriptions and reinforce a policy of professionalism, cooperation, and collegial communication. Part-time or temporary staff also should receive formal training because, like full-time employees, they need to understand the practice's policies, procedures, and day-to-day operations.

Additionally, whenever an employee's job description includes responsibilities that could reasonably be improved through training — such as communicating with patients, using various pieces of equipment, or handling billing issues — a written education program should set forth the formats, accountabilities, and methods of measurement to be used.
When employees complete training or education, proof of completion should be documented and maintained in their human resource files.

**Changes in Technology, Equipment, or Materials**

The use of equipment or materials for patient care is another area that should receive periodic review to ensure consistency in employee practice. Employees' job descriptions may need to address competency and compliance with equipment-related policies and procedures, such as authorization to use certain types of equipment.

The purchase of any new equipment or materials should trigger a risk assessment to determine whether staff training and the development of written procedures will be required. This is especially valuable if the use of the new equipment or material requires substantial changes in the processes staff will use going forward. Assessments related to new equipment should consider the equipment’s use, calibration, maintenance plan, and repair tag processes.

**Safety Training**

Safety training is an ongoing need for any medical practice and encompasses most every aspect of the practice. Specifically, a safety review will note whether or not staffers assess patients to determine if they might slip or fall. Will this same patient need assistance getting into or out of a treatment chair or off of a table? If so, how does the staffer engage in this activity without placing himself or herself, or the patient, at risk of physical injury?

Safety training should also consider special needs of specific patient populations, such as patients who are morbidly obese, have respiratory issues, or have neck or back pain. Does treatment planning regularly include assessments of patients’ physical condition for the purpose of identifying patients who might need to have breaks scheduled into the treatment plan? Is support material available as needed, such as pillows, pads, knee supports, etc.? What is the requirement for the cleaning/disposal of these materials?

Once the team starts looking for opportunities to fine-tune its safety processes, a variety of in-service training topics will become apparent.

**Confidentiality Training**

It is important that the medical practice's HIPAA program undergo an annual review and that the practice provide a HIPAA in-service for all staff, including a signed recommitment from each staff member relative to patient privacy and healthcare information security. It is vital that staff understand their responsibilities and obligations when handling confidential information.


**Communication**

Effective communication is the foundation for any healthcare service. Yet — beyond the basics of telephone courtesy and explanations of payment policies — few practices provide in-depth communication training for their employees. Regardless of the clinician's skill, the practice is unlikely to flourish if providers and staff are haphazard in the way they communicate among themselves and with their patients.

A review of office communication should identify those areas most likely to benefit from periodic review and reminders. Examples might include: (a) formal processes used to inform/educate patients, (b) consistency in the ways that staffers respond to patients' questions, and (c) activities that enable staff to identify risk issues and bring them to the attention of the administrative team.

Consistency in communication reduces the likelihood of patient confusion. Repetition of messages reinforces the patient’s ability to absorb, understand, and comply with instructions. Consistency also gives the impression of an organized and team-oriented approach, helps reinforce the patient’s ability to act as a partner in his or her own care, and can have a positive effect on the patient’s perception of courtesy, responsiveness, and expertise.

Used as a quality tool, an education process review also can help identify areas of inconsistency and misunderstanding among employees. Improved communication in the practice can help prevent patient injuries, ensure more patient-focused interactions, and enhance the team’s effectiveness and *esprit de corps*.

**Credentialing**

Effective education programs should also include the formal types of education that healthcare providers and staff pursue to maintain licenses, professional certification, and other business training. This should also apply to business classes like payroll management or software classes.

**Conclusion**

Periodic review of the medical practice's educational components ensures that no aspects of training become obsolete or forgotten. Periodic review identifies non-compliance and resolves misunderstanding about activities that support patient safety.

The practice-wide commitment to ongoing education enhances the pursuit of excellence — from a team perspective rather than from a variety of random activities. This difference will be noted by patients.
This "stitch in time" approach to education ensures that the all providers and staff feel a sense of ownership for the results of their task-related reviews — and that their input and suggestions are taken seriously. It shouldn't be only the physicians who are dedicated to patient safety and satisfaction. By using education as a quality improvement tool, the entire team can achieve and maintain this important goal.

This article was produced by the clinical risk management team at Medical Protective, the nation’s oldest professional liability insurance company dedicated to the healthcare professions. For additional information, please contact Laura Cascella at laura.cascella@medpro.com or visit the Medical Protective website at http://www.medpro.com/.

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