

THE TWO T'S OF REDUCING RISK: MINIMIZING HEALTHCARE WORKPLACE INJURIES BY TRACKING AND TRENDING HAZARDOUS INCIDENTS

By David Lennox, Ph.D.

Few industries are as heavily impacted by workplace injuries as healthcare. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, healthcare workers are much more likely to be injured on the job than those who work in other industries, with the rate of injury in hospitals and nursing care facilities twice the national average. Each year nearly one in every ten hospital workers sustains on the job injuries requiring time off, job transfer, or duty restriction. And the number is even higher for nurses and personal care employees, with 13% requiring some length of leave from work each year because of occupational injuring.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, "medical workers and healthcare providers are among the highest risk groups for workplace injury, and are one of the largest groups of claimants for workers compensation."

Prediction Is The Key To Prevention

The good news is that the incidents that cause many healthcare workplace injuries can be anticipated, and ultimately they can be prevented. There are many potential hazards facing healthcare workers. They range from those that are merely exasperating yet debilitating, such as lifting injuries, to those that are potentially deadly, such as needle sticks and exposure to chemicals. Other common risks including tripping and falling while providing care, contact with contaminated bodily fluids, and in certain settings, burns. Any can cause healthcare workers to miss considerable work time, and can lead to expensive workers compensation claims.

Caregivers in nursing homes and other facilities that provide care to seniors face an additional, and potentially more dangerous set of risks. In recent years nursing center demographics have shifted dramatically, with more residents than ever suffering from psychiatric illness and other diagnoses with secondary behavioral issues. Today nearly half of all nursing home residents suffer from dementia, with nearly one in five having a psychiatric diagnosis and one in three displaying some behavioral symptoms. As a result, in addition to the hazards that senior care providers have always faced, such as lifting injuries, they now also run the risk of being hurt by aggressive seniors who strike out at them or who try to injure themselves.

Given these facts, it's easy to see why nursing homes and other senior care facilities also experience a disproportionate number of staff injuries and lost workforce hours (not to mention staff turnover). According to OSHA, senior care facilities are among the most dangerous places to work, with employees more than twice as likely to be injured on the job than coal miners, and fifty percent more than those who work in a blast furnace or steel mill.

Workplace injury and workers compensation are among the most vexing problems facing healthcare and senior care facilities. The losses in terms of both worker hours and dollars are staggering.

However as problematic as injuries to healthcare and senior care professionals are to workers and employers alike, they can often be predicted and prevented. By tracking and trending incidences of injury against other variables, such as the time of day they occur, the day of the week, the location, and other related risk factors, risk managers can identify some of the factors that lead to those incidents. Policies and procedures can then be implemented to eliminate those risk factors. In fact, several accrediting agencies, including Joint Commission for the Accreditation of Healthcare Organizations (JCAHO), and the Council on Accreditation (COA) require tracking and trending to satisfy their accreditation requirements.

Tracking Incidents

Incident tracking has traditionally been a problem for healthcare and senior care facilities. In the past, incident data were typically compiled by hand, and only tabulated once a month. By the time the data were available, they were often out of date. Additionally, most facilities didn't have the resources to share the data to caregivers, and access was generally limited to administrators. Ultimately, the data that were compiled weren't as useful as they could have been because of the slow turn-around time for compiling and the limited distribution.

In the 1990's however, healthcare technology companies started to create incident tracking tools that could be used to electronically compile information about incident risk factors. These tools were more effective than the old pencil and paper method, but they still only represented a starting point. The equipment that was used to compile the information—generally a 'home-made' database program on a single desktop computer—wasn't mobile, was accessible to limited users, was memory-intensive and, as a result, caregivers couldn't use them to make on-the-spot decisions. Imagine a nurse pushing a desktop computer down a hospital hallway trying to compile incident data! It wouldn't exactly be conducive to excellence in care or risk management.

In recent years, however, technology has caught up with incident tracking software. Today, caregivers and risk managers can use laptops to access specialized software packages to track and trend incidents. With these tools, caregivers can record events that cause staff injuries, or have the potential to do so. That information is then instantly available at all times to caregivers and risk managers. Caregivers, of course, can use that information to make real-time decisions to enhance the patients care.

The information is equally useful to risk managers, who can use it to study trends as they pertain to workforce injuries. For instance, perhaps lift injuries are more likely to occur during shift changes; the software will outline that trend, permitting risk managers and staff to create new staffing procedures to eliminate the risk. Or, maybe staff in behavioral units are more likely to be injured by patients an hour or two before medication is typically distributed; medication administration can be refined to minimize agitation among patients. Or, maybe needle-stick injuries are more likely to occur during overnight

Reprinted from

The Journal of Workers Compensation • Vol. 16 No. 3 • Spring 2007

shifts, when there are fewer staff to support procedures and when staff and patients are both tired; incident tracking software can help lead the way to solving this very serious risk.

Unfortunately, it has often been difficult for healthcare and senior care facilities to find software that addresses their unique risk management needs at an affordable price. The healthcare software industry has undergone a great deal of consolidation in recent years, with large software companies purchasing smaller technology companies or licensing their technology. As a result, much of the incident tracking software that is commercially available can only be found bundled in larger suites of healthcare products that have no obvious relationship to risk management. Because these software products include so many different tools, they are often too expensive for any but the largest healthcare and senior care companies.

However, there are stand-alone incident tracking tools, and it is possible for healthcare risk managers to find a software package that meets their individual needs. It's just a matter of identifying the specific risk management needs of a facility, and then finding the software tool that best meets those needs.

The Next Step: Response

While tracking and trending hazardous incidents is essential, it is still just the first step in risk management. Once incidents are tracked and hazards identified, risk managers and facility administrators need to take the next step: implementing policies and procedures to eliminate those risks.

Often, programmatic changes can be implemented to avoid hazards that commonly cause workforce injury. Changes to staffing patterns during high-incident periods, or adjustments in the way medications are distributed are just a couple of examples of proactive responses that can minimize risk identified through incident tracking.

However, these types of initiatives often aren't enough. Sometimes staff need to respond immediately to a hazard when it presents itself. In these cases, incident tracking tools can play a vital role in helping staff identify when an incident is likely to occur and what actions and skills will be necessary to respond to that incident in an appropriate fashion. For these occasions, healthcare and senior care facilities should have training programs in place to help staff address dangerous situations.

Again, understanding risk factors is essential for developing successful training programs, and incident tracking and trending tools can be invaluable. By helping risk managers recognize the most common hazards, as well as the types of injuries they are most likely to cause, these tools provide the information that organizations need to create personalized training programs that meet their distinct risk management requirements.

While incident tracking is an important element in the creation of risk management training programs, it is equally important in helping facilities minimize unnecessary training. When administrators understand the most common hazards facing staff, they are able to avoid creating wasteful training programs designed to address hypothetical perils or incidents that occur infrequently. Many facilities that actively measure and trend incidents to guide the development of their risk

management programs find that they can dramatically reduce their training budgets by effectively targeting those risks that are particularly problematic for their organizations.

Incident tracking can also be useful in identifying and eliminating environmental precipitants to common problems. For instance if patient falls are leading to lifting injuries, and a disproportionate number of those falls are occurring throughout the day in a particular location on a unit, it is reasonable to assume that some environmental factor could be at play. Perhaps the floor's surface is too slick, or the location is too remote to provide easy access for staff to assist patients. Tracking tools can't tell risk managers exact cause of these incidents, but by providing information about where and when incidents are occurring, and who is involved, they can provide important clues to help staff better identify those causes.

Finally, incident tracking can also provide clues when equipment failures are responsible for hazardous incidents. If an unusually large number of accidents are occurring while certain types of equipment are being used, tracking tools can help identify those situations and quantify the degree of danger that is presented. With this information in hand, risk managers and facility administrators can then make informed judgments about how to rectify the situation.

An Important Tool

Workforce injuries are common in healthcare settings, and they can have a disastrous impact on any healthcare or senior care organization. The hazards that are widespread throughout the industry are largely responsible for the significant staff turnover among facilities, and for the huge workers compensation costs that beset the industry.

However by tracking and trending the incidents that can lead to staff injury, healthcare and senior care facilities can take a vital first step towards identifying hazards and creating policies and procedures to eliminate them. And by using these tools to create a safer work environment, facilities will enjoy better staff morale, less turn-over, fewer survey and accreditation problems, lower training costs and reduced training time, and significantly reduced data management time and cost. They will also save a lot of money in overtime and workers compensation costs.

David Lennox, Ph.D., is president of the QBS Companies, a leading provider of behavioral training, consultation, and program development services. The company's stand-alone tracking software, Quality Tracking Solutions, is a customizable web-based risk management tool.