

How Staff Education Can Improve Quality and Enhance Patient Safety and Experience

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The knowledge and dedication of employees play a significant role in the success of any business or organization, including healthcare practices. Over the years, analyses of malpractice claims has shown that the overall healthcare team has a direct impact on patient safety, engagement, and satisfaction. When employees feel that they are valued for their contributions, they often are more likely to invest themselves in the healthcare practice's success, which includes providing a safe and satisfying experience for patients.

Thus, it stands to reason that healthcare practices that invest in staff education and team training are likely to have lower rates of employee turnover. Further, having an experienced team in a clinical environment can reduce the risk of errors and suboptimal outcomes and enhance patient safety.

Create a Learning Organization

Just as healthcare providers are encouraged to conduct risk assessments of their practices, it also makes sense to conduct educational assessments of their staff to identify (a) gaps in communication, (b) policies that should be updated 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).

Healthcare 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 technology, or handling billing issues — a written education program

should set forth the formats, accountabilities, and potential methods of measurement to be used.

When employees complete training or education, proof of completion should be documented and maintained in their human resources files.

Changes in Technology or Equipment

The use of technology or equipment for patient care is another area that healthcare providers should periodically 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 particular types of equipment.

The purchase of any new technology or equipment should trigger a risk assessment to determine whether the practice will need to develop written procedures and provide staff training. Written procedures and training programs are especially valuable if the new technology or equipment will necessitate substantial changes in staff workflows. 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 healthcare practice, and it encompasses most every aspect of the practice. A few examples of diverse safety issues include physical support for patients who need help getting into and out of treatment chairs or onto treatment tables, identification of patients at risk of falling, and compliance with radiation safety guidelines.

Safety training should also consider special needs of specific patient populations, such as patients who are obese, have respiratory issues, or have neck or back pain. For example:

- Does treatment planning regularly include assessing patients' physical conditions for the purpose of identifying patients who might need to have breaks scheduled into the treatment plan?
- Are support materials available as needed, such as pillows, pads, knee supports, etc.?
- What is the requirement for the cleaning/disposal of support materials?

Answers to these questions and other safety considerations will help determine ongoing training needs for providers and staff members.

Confidentiality Training

Healthcare providers and staff members have an ethical and legal responsibility to protect patient confidentiality by preventing unauthorized disclosure of patient-identifiable health information.

Because privacy and confidentiality are high priorities in healthcare, healthcare providers should review their HIPAA programs annually and provide HIPAA-focused training for all staff members, including a signed confidentiality statement from each staff member relative to patient privacy and security of protected healthcare information. It is imperative that staff members understand their responsibilities and obligations when handling confidential information.

Communication Training

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 clinical expertise and skill level, a practice is unlikely to flourish if providers and staff are haphazard and inconsistent in the way they communicate among themselves and with their patients.

A review of office communication should identify areas and processes 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 staff members respond to patients' questions, concerns, and complaints (including training on de-escalation techniques); 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, and repetition of messages reinforces patients' ability to absorb, understand, and adhere to instructions. Consistency also gives the impression of an organized and team-oriented approach, helps reinforce patients' ability to act as partners in their care, and can have a positive effect on patients' perception of courtesy, responsiveness, and expertise.

A review of communication protocols also can help identify areas of inconsistency and misunderstanding among employees. Improved communication in the healthcare practice can help prevent patient injuries, ensure more patient-focused interactions, and enhance the team's effectiveness and job satisfaction.

Credentialing

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

In Summary

Conducting periodic reviews of healthcare practices' educational initiatives ensures that no aspects of training become obsolete or forgotten. Furthermore, periodic review identifies issues of noncompliance and resolves misunderstanding about activities that support patient safety.

Making a practice-wide commitment to ongoing education enhances the pursuit of excellence from a team perspective rather than from a variety of random activities. Additionally, adequate education and training help foster a sense of ownership and commitment to high-quality service and care among providers and staff members.

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