

WHAT EMPLOYERS CAN DO ABOUT MEDICAL ERRORS

When medical errors happen, especially errors that cause serious harm to the patient, the medical staff must remediate the unforeseen medical problems. Because of this, serious medical errors increase payer costs – for insurance companies, employers, taxpayers and employees. In addition to the unnecessary medical costs, harmed patients may possibly lose time away from work (absenteeism) or attend work, but not function at full capacity due to physical and/or emotional reasons (presenteeism). Unlike absenteeism, which is very easy to measure, presenteeism is more difficult to measure – yet can eventually be even more expensive than absenteeism for employers.

Like it or not, employers own this problem. In fact, the costs associated with unintended harm appears in the premiums employers and employees pay, also known as a “hidden surcharge.”¹ So what can employers do about it? Actually, quite a bit.

APPROACHES EMPLOYERS CAN TAKE TO REDUCE THE INCIDENCE OF MEDICAL ERRORS

- ✓ **Insurance contracting decision process:** As major purchasers of healthcare, employers can play a much bigger role in reducing the incidence of medical errors. This can be done by interacting with insurance carriers, third-party administrators and benefits-consulting partners to raise expectations for patient-safety improvements and enhanced quality outcomes. Purchasers cannot afford to assume this task will be adequately and consistently addressed by third-parties to protect their interests.

As major healthcare purchasers, employers do have the right to insist that vendors promote and implement patient-safety practices when negotiating contracts with healthcare providers – contracts that do not reimburse for medical errors. Additionally, vendors should develop contracts that provide incentives to providers who can adequately document safe care. Insurance carriers must continually find new approaches to successfully vet, measure and assess the safety and quality of each physician and hospital within the carrier's provider network(s). The minimum essential requirement for improving the safety and quality-of-care is transparency of costs and documented-provider outcomes. Iowa employers fervently believe that patients' safety-of-care is just as important as having reasonable costs and quality of care.²
(See HHRI fact sheet: “Why Medical Errors Should be Important to Iowa Employers”)
- ✓ **Develop a coalition with other like-minded employers and purchasers in your community.** By working together with other local employers who are committed to pursuing transparency and improvement in local hospitals and clinics, the provider community will be more likely to pay attention and act. To generate provider action, local employers can publicize their meetings through local media. One national organization that has developed regional coalitions around patient-safety issues, and can be a helpful resource for employers, is The Leapfrog Group: (<http://www.leapfroggroup.org/employers-purchasers/value-tools>).
- ✓ **Meet with local hospital(s) and clinic(s) to convey the importance of safety and quality. Require they demonstrate cultures of safety.** Initiate an on-going dialogue with the provider community about quality and patient-safety expectations, and insist that robust processes are being used to eliminate medical errors in the future. Employer representatives who serve on local hospital boards can champion the urgency of keeping safe and quality care as the focus for incremental improvement. Pursuit for perfection should not be the excuse to maintain the status quo. In fact, even imperfect measurements and transparency can produce quality improvement.

¹ 2013 The Leapfrog Group, *The Hidden Surcharge Americans Pay for Hospital Errors*. (Updated October 28, 2013)

² David P. Lind Benchmark. *2014 Iowa Employer Benefits Study*®.

- ✓ **Actively communicate the importance of safety issues to employees.** Employees and dependents who use your insurance coverage are on the front lines of battling medical mistakes. As patients, employees should know which medications they're taking, what their medications look like, what their usual dose is and what possible side effects can result. They should notify their doctor immediately if they notice anything seemingly wrong with their prescription or any side effects. Resources on patient safety – such as important questions to ask doctors – are available on the Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality website: <https://www.ahrq.gov/patients-consumers/patient-involvement/ask-your-doctor/index.html>. (See HHRI fact sheet: "Tips to Help Prevent Medical Errors")
- ✓ **Encourage employees to report medical errors when they occur.** *The Iowa Patient Safety Study*³, along with other national studies³, find that patients report medical errors primarily because they want to prevent the same error from happening again to someone else. If information about a patient safety event is incomplete or is not reported, providers cannot make the necessary changes to ensure the problem does not happen again. (See HHRI fact sheet: "What Can Iowans Do When Experiencing a Medical Error?")
- ✓ **Visit with both state and federally-elected officials, trade association groups in which your organization participates, and other local commerce organizations.** Developing a 'collective voice' will go a long way in making the changes that are needed to ensure medical errors are not swept under the rug. This epidemic has festered for decades, and assuming the provider community will fix it themselves is not the solution. It takes local public voices to incite action and eventual progress to eliminate this local and national problem.

There isn't one fool-proof way for employers to make a difference in promoting patient-safety measures. However, employers can consistently pursue a multi-prong approach to demonstrate just how important safety and quality-of-care is to the well-being of their workforce. It all begins with one strong voice.

Resources Available for Employers and Employees:

Blue Distinction Center Finder: www.bcbs.com/innovations/bluedistinction/center-list/selector-map.htm

CMS Hospital Compare: www.hospitalcompare.hhs.gov

The Commonwealth Fund's quality information website: www.whynotthebest.org/

Consumer Reports Health Ratings: www.consumerreports.org/health/home.htm

HealthGrades: www.healthgrades.com/

Hospital Safety Scores: www.hospitalsafetyscore.org

Leapfrog Hospital Survey Results: www.leapfroggroup.org/cp

ShareCare: www.sharecare.com

WebMD: www.webmd.com

To read the full report: "Iowa Patient Safety Study: Iowans' Views on Medical Errors³ 2017," please visit our Heartland Health Research Institute website.

³ NORC at the University of Chicago and IHI/NPSF Lucian Leape Institute. (2017) *Americans' Experiences with Medical Errors and Views on Patient Safety*. Pages 25-26. CHICAGO, IL

