

PROCESS



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Medical Errors Are a Key Patient Threat: What Is the Impact of Your SPD?

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The work performed in a Sterile Processing department (SPD) can be very taxing and has traditionally been associated with physical strain as a result of heavy lifting, repetitive movement and the constant pressure to improve productivity. It is also important, however, to recognize Sterile Processing (SP) professionals' role in patient safety and how failures in the department can contribute to medical errors. Research published in the *British Medical Journal* found that medical errors are now the third leading cause of death in the US, totaling more than 250,000 annually (third only to heart disease and cancer, respectively, and occur more frequently than death from respiratory disease, accidents and stroke).¹

Healthcare leaders must fully understand the needs of the departments with which they are responsible and how the distinct workspaces, particularly in the SPD (dirty/decontamination areas, assembly/sterilization areas, and storage areas), function on a daily basis. With the added complexity in the design of instrumentation and equipment, the simple process of cleaning instruments has, in many cases, outpaced the SPD's ability to keep up with demands. Instrument assembly and sterilization functions are not easy. Instrument wrap, container systems and complex

manufacturer instructions for use (IFU) can make the job even more challenging. Even the storage of instruments and equipment can be difficult and problematic due to space constraints in many facilities.

Adequate resources for today's growing responsibilities

SPDs across the country are faced with many obstacles. Staffing; education and training; space constraints; sophisticated and complex instruments and equipment; inadequate instrumentation inventories to support the surgical volume; the management of loaned trays; and the ever-growing need to follow complicated IFU are just a few of the challenges that can make work in the SPD seem insurmountable.

More than ever, SPDs are having difficulty keeping up with the ever-growing demand; however, healthcare organizations do not always put their SP professionals first or feel their work has a direct impact on patient care (when, in fact, it absolutely does). Leaders responsible for these departments must continuously evolve, stay current with changes that impact the SPD, and strive to achieve departmental goals that align with the organization. Additionally, they must become effective decisionmakers regarding key changes that will have a positive impact on the health and well-

being of their customers and patients.

Headlines detailing how healthcare organizations have used non-sterile or non-terminally cleaned equipment on their patients are becoming increasingly common. In some cases, patients have been left with devastating disabilities or, even worse, lost their lives as a result. Over the past two decades, thousands of patients have been affected by health systems' failure to properly process and maintain reusable medical equipment and instrumentation. An investigation into a series of surgical site infections (SSIs) that occurred in a Texas hospital were caused by dirty surgical instruments. The Association for Professionals in Infection Control and Epidemiology (APIC) found that three of 20 endoscopes used to examine gastrointestinal tracts and colons were improperly cleaned, harboring unacceptable levels of bioburden and other matter from previous patient exams.² This has led US health officials to issue safety warnings on specialty endoscopes that have been linked to the transmission of a drug-resistant superbug known as carbapenem-resistant Enterobacteriaceae, or CRE.³ Still, these problems persist.

Although every type of facility (e.g., community-based hospital, large metropolitan hospital, academic medical center, level I trauma center or



ambulatory surgery center) is unique, each shares similar challenges when it comes to the SP function. To address common obstacles and achieve a highly reliable department, healthcare leaders must maintain high performance outcomes for the ever-evolving standards of care; meet the growing demands for improved quality and safety; and maintain their budgets while dramatic changes in reimbursement are occurring. Healthcare leaders must have a better understanding of the inner workings of the SPD in order to adopt new practices and processes and create a structure that supports not only the organization's mission, but the demands of the SPD as well.

Healthcare leaders rely heavily on the SPD, yet they often lack a true understanding of the workload SP professionals endure every day and across every shift. Leaders may also be unaware of the harm that can be caused when a process, practice, IFU or standards/guidelines aren't properly followed. With the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS) and The Joint Commission (TJC) actively surveying SPDs and other areas responsible for medical device reprocessing, leaders must embrace the department and the professionals who work there, and they must ensure they have the resources needed to do the job safely, effectively and consistently. Understanding the science behind SP and the work needed to properly process reusable medical devices will pay dividends for healthcare organizations, which includes improving patient outcomes, boosting market share, and keeping the facility out of the (negative) headlines.

Dollars and sense: Balancing OR & SPD needs


Hospital procedure areas are revenue generators and hospitals depend on perioperative services for well over half of their net revenue. In better performing

hospitals, the Operating Room (OR) can generate two-thirds of topline revenue and up to 60% of its margin.⁴ The more patients that can be treated, the more revenue a hospital can generate. Because of this production-based model, SPDs are expected to keep up with the demand. Unfortunately, SP professionals often lack the attention and resources they need to meet that demand. Healthcare leaders who do not understand the complexity and what it takes to reprocess the thousands of instruments, devices and medical equipment and fail to staff the SPD adequately are forcing their SPDs to run at a dangerous deficit. When corners are cut to keep up with unrealistic demand, the price is great – certainly for the facility, but most importantly, for the patient. Revenue generated by a procedure can be quickly lost as a result of an SSI, death or other negative outcome.

Because the SPD is not considered a revenue-generating department, it can be challenging to develop a unit of service that makes sense to manage workflow demands. Typically, OR minutes are used to manage the unit of service for the SPD, which is inappropriate considering a procedure may only take an hour, but the manpower needed to prepare the instrumentation may take an entire shift to complete. As a result, unrealistic productivity standards continue to be imposed upon SP professionals. In many cases, they are being asked to do more with less – and that can include less time, less inventory, fewer staff and even inadequate training and reprocessing equipment to manage the responsibilities safely and effectively. Obviously, that can lead to disastrous consequences. One large US medical center made headline news in 2016 after it was discovered that the organization struggled to properly clean surgical instruments for years. Understandably, this was devastating news to the thousands of patients

who underwent surgery there. Seven months later, the organization spent more than \$1million to fix issues with its surgical instruments, but to no avail. By November 2018, a second hospital in the organization's system failed a federal inspection. When organizations fail to address such issues, they are at risk of losing federal funding.

Conclusion

SP professionals play a vital role in their healthcare organizations' mission of delivering safe, high-quality care to patients in their communities. It is imperative that SP leaders commit to educating administrators, surgeons and infection preventionists about the challenging, demanding and vital work performed by SP professionals. Leaders who value SP, focus on how it can positively impact the health and safety of their patients, collaborate with other departments to support patient and healthcare worker needs, and ensure adequate resources are provided so shortcuts are never taken will help ensure their facilities make headlines for all the right reasons. 

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