Healthcare providers are constantly looking for ways to improve the quality of service they provide to meet the demands of the public and close quality gaps in healthcare systems. One key to providing high-quality care is starting with a culture of accountability, which can help reduce the overuse, misuse, and underuse of resources; increase use of clinical guidelines and evidence-based practice; improve patient care outcomes; and ultimately create a continuous learning organization.

What is a culture of accountability?

In a culture of accountability:
• the common belief is continuous learning and improvement at the individual, unit/department, and organizational levels.
• decisions regarding care and direction are guided by evidence-based protocols and clinical guidelines, not individual preference.
• performance measurement is essential for assessing outcomes and guiding improvement initiatives.
• reporting errors is encouraged, not punished.
• there’s collaboration and coordination among and between all levels of the organization.

A culture of accountability improves the quality of patient care by increasing the use of evidence-based medicine and performance measurement with the aim of reducing inappropriate care. If employees and organizations are holding themselves more accountable, the desire to learn and use evidence-based practices and performance measurement tools will increase.

Step by step

Follow these six steps to create a culture of accountability where you work.

1. **Provide leadership.** Strong leadership enhances employee responsibility, morale, cooperation, and trust and reduces employee turnover, helping to maintain accountability within the organization. Leadership that exemplifies accountability should be pervasive at all levels of the organization.

2. **Emphasize quality.** It’s important to reinforce that not only the quality of patient care will improve but also the quality of work will improve organization-wide. If employees associate the development of a culture of accountability with being reprimanded, it’s unlikely they’ll accept the new direction.

3. **Make customer service a priority.** An environment that provides exceptional quality care not only improves the patient’s experience but also leads to more satisfied staff, fewer preventable medical errors, fewer malpractice lawsuits, and improved revenues, therefore helping to reinforce a culture of accountability. Training sessions must be provided to all staff on how to deliver good customer service.

4. **Performance management.** Performance measurement is important because measurement...
Create a culture of accountability
(continued)

informs on quality, and you can’t manage what you don’t measure. The measurement of outcomes includes monitoring the performance of the organization against service standards and organizational goals as well as collecting feedback from patients and other stakeholders. Once information has been collected, it must be reported and assessed to ensure the translation of feedback from measures into strategies for action that can be used to improve healthcare.

5. Support the human dimension. Change often causes fear, anxiety, and resistance in employees. However, supporting the human dimension can help to minimize these feelings. This begins by increasing the self-efficacy of employees, which positively enhances their beliefs about their capabilities, by giving them training, responsibility, and involvement in decision-making processes. Ensure that employees are rewarded by using a recognition program that celebrates both small and large successes formally and informally. Rewarding employees fosters a culture that recognizes and accepts achievements that reflect accountability.

6. Provide a supportive infrastructure. It’s important to provide people with the means and competencies necessary to be successful. Effective communication systems are needed that allow the distribution of information and knowledge to the rest of the organization. A human resource management system that ensures that individual performance is monitored and compared to accepted standards is a necessity.

A culture of accountability improves the quality of patient care by increasing the use of evidence-based medicine and performance measurement.

Follow these six steps to help you create a culture of accountability, allowing performance management and continuous learning and change to become enduring traits of your healthcare organization.

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As a healthcare provider, you’re in a unique position to educate your patients—and that education can be life-saving. Proper patient education helps reverse poor health literacy, which researchers have linked to increased medication errors, greater incidence of chronic diseases such as diabetes and hypertension, and higher death rates.

Education also benefits you by reducing the risk of a lawsuit from an injury caused because you failed to provide your patient with the information he or she needed.

Here are four “C” (Communication) education strategies to help you become a more effective teacher.

Communicate clearly
Keep to one, two, or three points (depending on the complexity of what you want to communicate and how much time you have) at any one interaction with your patient. Don’t use jargon or fancy words. For older patients, be sure your voice isn’t pitched too high, which is difficult for them to hear.

Appeal to a patient’s preferred learning style—visual, auditory, or kinesthetic—to communicate more effectively. Most of us are visual learners, so a brochure, video, or photo works well. Auditory learners retain information better when they’re hearing it, so you might consider podcasts. Kinesthetic learners are hands-on, so provide time for your patient to handle any equipment you’re explaining. Because we learn by all three methods, consider combining strategies. For example, a video combines both visual and auditory styles.

Choose the right tools
Many education tools are available, including videos, brochures, handouts, and picture books for those who can’t read. Be sure print materials are appropriate for a patient’s reading level—to reach most Americans, use content written at a sixth- to eighth-grade level. (See http://depts.washington.edu/pes/AssessingReading.htm for a way to calculate reading level.) Choose written materials with a large type size and printed on nonglare paper for older patients, who often have vision problems.

Don’t forget the Internet and social media tools. U.S. government agencies and reputable association and university Web sites are excellent sources for information and often include videos and PDFs that you can download. Social media tools such as podcasts, blogs, YouTube, and Facebook can also be helpful, but be cautious. Stick to nationally known resources.

Connect the information
Help your patients connect what you’re teaching to “real life.” For example, you might compare atherosclerosis to a drainpipe with built-up deposits. Give them ideas on how to link information so they can remember it. If you want them to remember to do a certain exercise every day, for example, have them post a note on their calendar or put the instructions for the exercise where they’ll be sure to see it, such as in the same cabinet with their medications.

Part of connecting is being specific. It’s not enough to say, “Eat more foods with calcium.” Provide a list of foods high in calcium and how they should eat each day.

Concisely present the information
Organize the information you want to pass on and evaluate whether your patient absorbed the information. Instead of asking yes-or-no questions, ask open-ended questions and use the “teach-back” method—ask your patient to paraphrase or demonstrate what you’ve taught. This is important if you’re demonstrating a technique, rather than simply asking, “Do you understand?” Most people are too embarrassed to say “No.”

You can be more efficient by not teaching patients when they’re distracted by noise and the stress of their own concerns. Try to find a quiet, comfortable place and answer their questions before you start teaching. Don’t rush through the information. For older patients, schedule teaching sessions in mid-morning, when energy levels tend to be higher.

Teach and save a life
More than 90 million American’s can’t understand basic health information. Use the four “C’s” to teach your patients what they need to know—you might just save a life.

Cynthia Saver, MS, RN, President, CLS Development, Columbia, Maryland.
When you’re researching a topic online, it’s easy to turn to Wikipedia or Google, do a quick search, and find what you need. But have you thought about where the information that’s posted on Wikipedia and Google actually comes from?

When it comes to medical information, you want to make sure the material you use comes from a reliable, trustworthy source. Wikipedia may seem like a virtual version of the encyclopedias that sit on library shelves, but did you realize that anyone can post information to the site? There’s very little accountability on Wikipedia—anyone from the guy down the street who’s never opened a medical textbook in his life to the pharmaceutical sales rep who wants to show his product in a favorable light can add information to Wikipedia or edit what’s already there.

If you do a Google search, how do you know that the sites that come up on the first one or two pages are reliable? They’re just ranked by popularity—how many people have visited the sites. Some of your search results may have even paid to get to the top of the list!

There are some trustworthy places you can go to find up-to-date, accurate information. If you’re looking for medical articles, PubMed (www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed) is the place to start. The PubMed database houses more than 19 million citations for biomedical articles. Just type in a few keywords and you can find the latest published research on any topic.

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