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Training from Fighter Pilots Helps Some Hospitals Decrease Medical Errors

Looking for ways to improve patient safety? Some hospitals are taking a “Top Gun” approach, hiring a group of former fighter pilots, astronauts, and physicians to teach their staffs the team skills needed to reduce medical errors.

LifeWings Partners, LLC, was founded by a former U.S. Navy flight instructor and commercial airline pilot in 1999. By teaching aviation-based teamwork skills and safety tools to hospital staff, LifeWings representatives say they’ve helped hospitals save patient lives and reduce costs.

Vanderbilt University Medical Center in Nashville, Tenn., is one of LifeWings’ success stories. In 2005, the hospital ranked number one on the Leapfrog Group’s Hospital Quality and Safety Survey out of 900 hospitals participating in the survey—just two years after contracting with LifeWings to create a culture of safety in which potential medical errors are avoided.

“Over the past three years, we have trained almost 2,500 physicians, employees, and nurses as part of building a culture of safety,” says Harry R. Jacobson, MD, vice chancellor for health affairs at Vanderbilt University. The team-based skills taught by LifeWings have played “a crucial role” in achieving high levels of patient care and safety, Jacobson says.

Another hospital that underwent LifeWings training reduced its surgery error rate from one error every 60 days to one error every 619 days—10 times better than the national average.

Richard S. Clark, Jr., vice president for LifeWings, said the behavioral training LifeWings provides gives hospital staff the skills needed to form effective teams, communicate effectively, and better cope with stress and conflict. LifeWings also works with hospitals to implement the tools needed to improve patient safety, such as standard safety protocols and procedure checklists.

“It’s basically a matter of doing things in a standardized manner that would make it really difficult for someone to make an error,” Clark says.

The key to the success of this program lies not only in the teamwork skills that hospital staff learn, but in the standardized protocols that LifeWings helps hospitals implement as well. “Behavioral training alone will not result in long-term change. You have to hardwire the organization with the strategies and tools needed to improve patient safety, such as standard procedures for patient handoffs and administering medication,” Clark says.

For more information, visit the LifeWings website at www.saferpatients.com.