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Top Gun Pilot Shows Caregivers How to Avoid Mistakes

By Marc Willis, MJ, RRT

The emergency room can be a strange place to work. One moment you're sitting around with nothing to do; an hour later, it's so busy you can't find beds for all the patients.

In the midst of this, doctors run from room to room examining patients and ordering lab work, X-rays and other tests to come up with a diagnosis. Nurses, meanwhile, carry out orders, starting intravenous fluids and administering medications.

In an environment where there are usually more patients than health care workers to take care of them and things happen fast and often, there is always a chance mistakes will happen. It is not because people are incompetent or negligent; but sometimes in the hospital setting, there is a breakdown in communication, and things get lost in translation.

What if there were ways to avoid errors in the emergency room and throughout the hospital, ways to help eliminate breakdowns in communication that lead to a patient receiving the wrong medication or the wrong surgery?

"We have found that in the emergency room, especially under high workloads, there is often a problem with effective communication between the physicians and the nursing staff," said Stephen Harden, president of LifeWings Partners LLC and co-founder of Crew Training International Inc. (CTI), the parent company of LifeWings. "We teach hospital staff how to use better teamwork and communication skills to catch and correct one another's small slips and mistakes before they lead to a serious medical error."

Best Practices in Place

LifeWings is a proven, practical, effective program designed by professional aviators and adapted for health care by physicians and nurses with scores of years of experience to reduce preventable errors based on aviation's best practices.

LifeWings is a program with two key components—teamwork training and implementation of hardwired safety tools such as checklists, Harden explained. When used together, the two will give hospitals the same proven safety system used by other high reliability organizations to provide permanent culture change, he added.

In the late 1980s, aviation industry experts and researchers realized the primary root cause of commercial airline crashes was not technical incompetence of pilots and crews or mechanical failure. Seventy to 80 percent of fatal accidents were due to teamwork failures among crews. Although new technology in aircraft cockpits seemed to help, each new piece of technology initiated a potential new source of human error.

In response, federal regulators required commercial air carriers to institute Crew Resource Management (CRM) team training for airline pilots and crews. This training prepared pilots and crews to catch each other's slips and mistakes before they became serious errors that led to accidents or incidents.

CRM training was so successful that military and commercial aviation organizations saw dramatic decreases in accident rates.

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"The system tools include leadership development training and teamwork training," Harden explained. "Health care workers learn hardwired safety practices like standard procedures, use checklists to avoid over-reliance on memory and develop measurement programs to prove results and determine return on investment. They get lifetime results through our Master Trainer program."

Experienced Navy Pilot

Prior to his work at LifeWings, Harden built a reputation on more than 300 aircraft carrier landings while a pilot in the U.S. Navy. His expertise later got him selected to become an instructor pilot at the Navy's elite Fighter Weapons School (TOPGUN). Harden also built a resume helping the aviation industry overcome problems that lead to errors. "In the eighties, airlines realized many of the problems came from a communication failure among the crew," Harden explained.

As the principal courseware designer of CTI's CRM training for the U.S. Air Combat Command, Air National Guard, domestic and commercial airlines, construction crews and hospital surgical teams, Harden supervised the production of more than 40 separate courses for a wide variety of military and commercial customers.

Hospital officials saw something in Harden's work in the aviation industry they felt would benefit medical staffs. "Success is achieved when the client reaps the harvest of improved workplace performance because of the LifeWings program," Harden said. "Better workplace performance is seen by reduced errors, saved lives and improved quality of care."

Even in a crazy place like the emergency room where strange things happen, there is less chance errors will occur provided good teamwork and communication are part of the environment.

Marc Willis is a Pennsylvania television reporter.