

Medical teamwork

Caregivers undergoing aviation-style training

By Jane Roberts

Contact

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In the "John Wayne" style of hospital management, surgeons run the operating room. Everybody else has the good sense to keep quiet.

While the environment has been great for surgeon egos, the Institute of Medicine started things crumbling in 1999 with its estimate that 98,000 people die each year due to hospital error.

"It's really the ultimate story of betrayal. The system you think is going to make you well ends up hurting you," said Steve Harden, one of two pilots who founded Crew Training International Inc. here in 1992.

"Part of the fix was to adapt more of an aviation model in the way they train and conduct business," he said.

Today, Harden is president of LifeWings Partners LLC, the arm of Crew Training that is expected to earn \$1.6 million this year helping people in health care learn aviation-style "crew resource management," short for checklists, "pretrip" briefings and handoffs.

"The way we say it, we're hardwiring communication behaviors into daily operations," said Harden, a FedEx pilot in a company that includes pilots from Northwest Airlines and Delta Air Lines.

"Most of the problems are caused by a breakdown in communication and teamwork on the part of the caregivers. We put tools in place to make sure everyone's talking."

So far, LifeWings has helped nearly 40 clients -- most of them hospitals -- begin to turn things around.

"The results are pretty dramatic," he said. "One of our biggest clients was running a



Karen Pulfer
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Steve Harden is a commercial pilot. Using those skills he also trains people in the health care industry about teamwork, communication and procedural standards to help prevent mistakes and improve their efficiency and safety records.

wrong surgery once every 60 days."

Its error rate is now one every 619 days, 10 times better than the national average, which is 15 wrongs per 100,000 procedures.

LifeWings's teachings start with the simple premise that anyone on the team -- including patients -- might have information that could mean life or death.

"Wouldn't you want to believe that anyone in the entire institution could pull the switch and say, 'We aren't going to do this surgery because something is wrong,' " said Karen Sexton, vice president and CEO of University of Texas Medical Branch at Galveston, which just signed on with LifeWings.

"We want that to be the case, too. It's not an excuse to say, 'I didn't because he would yell at me.'

"Patients need better advocates than that. It's now going to be part of your job to speak up."

In an industry where the "surgeon has been captain of the ship and had all the responsibility and all the control," expect a complete culture change.

The University of Missouri Medical Center over two years has invested "hundreds of thousands" to train nearly 800 employees through LifeWings, according to Dr. Les Hall, dean of clinical effectiveness.

"Clearly there are lots of health care organizations that are beginning to take this seriously and are investing heavily in improving team training."

The biggest result he's seen is in attitude.

"The old version -- the John Wayne style -- was to make sure you're the only the voice that's heard. That's not a very effective model of leadership, at least in health care," Hall said.

It wasn't in aviation, either.

In the early 1990s when the Federal Aviation Administration forced the industry to adopt strategies to enhance teamwork and communication, between 70 and 80 percent of all accidents "were due in part to absent or deficient crew cross check or communication," said Mike Osborn, LifeWings vice president and a Northwest pilot.

"The theory was the pilot is in command. It's his airplane, and he does what he wants. If he wants input, he will ask for it. Other than that, the first officer was supposed to sit there and watch the aircraft go down.

"It's completely different now. Team training is part of our culture, and it happened very quickly because of the dramatic drop in accidents," Osborn said.

"Error is inevitable. But you can manage error by training specific behaviors. That's where the results come in."

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