white paper

PATIENT ASSESSMENT BEST PRACTICES

How agencies can protect caregivers, and those in their care

Philadelphia Insurance Companies

A Member of the Tokio Marine Group

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The importance — for the patient and for homecare companies — of developing and implementing an effective patient assessment plan cannot be overstated.

Protecting patients is the first priority; protecting a small business from unwanted suits is also important. And while no one wants to be charged with negligence, instituting an effective patient assessment plan is more than a legal question. Taking proper care of those entrusted to you is a moral imperative.

Designing a thorough assessment questionnaire helps companies identify at-risk patients, like those who are prone to falls or have specialized health issues. The plan ensures that good patient/caregiver assignments are made, the entire staff is well trained, and that they know what do to when an incident does occur. The way episodes are handled can be as crucial to the overall results as the incident itself. Companies should make it their business to be prepared for any situation, to think of possible outcomes, and to create a strategy to mitigate those situations.

Organizing

The place to start when designing a patient assessment plan is with outlining a process. Your company will need a task force to put the plan and training together. At the onset, ask yourself a few questions:

- What are the long-term goals of the plan? This is the most important question you will face. It sets the stage for the rest of the process.
- Who on your team is qualified to be part of the task force to develop the plan?
- Should you hire a consultant?
- Are there professionals from other disciplines who can help you set goals and develop the plan?
- Who should see the plan for final approval?

Next, set a schedule for the task force. Set deadlines and stick to them (see timeline on next page). As part of the schedule, do not forget to include consulting the people the plan will impact most — your employees. Many times, companies overlook the importance of employee participation. In truth, people resist change—sometimes even when the change benefits them directly. Seeking and receiving buy-in from the team can help everyone adopt the mindset of the plan before training begins. Ask for volunteers, opinions, and suggestions. Including your team may tie up their time, but the investment of time can be priceless. It will ultimately take participation from everyone to implement and follow the plan.

When organizing the plan, it is also worthwhile to seek advice from other professionals. Physicians and hospital administrators may have insight that could help. Your insurance company may provide topics to cover that you would not consider if your team works on the plan without their help. An insurance company can advise how to recognize high-risk clients and what kind of planning is beneficial when it comes to their needs. Legal counsel can provide additional expertise. Include questions about demographics and health issues.

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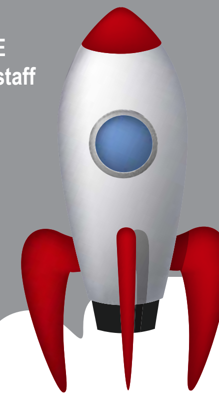
LAUNCH DEADLINES FOR DEVELOPING AND IMPLEMENTING A PATIENT ASSESSMENT PLAN

- **19** WEEKS BEFORE LAUNCH: Select task force to work on plan
- **17** WEEKS BEFORE LAUNCH: Meet with task force to outline deadlines
- **16** WEEKS BEFORE LAUNCH: Let full staff know about the timeline, stress the benefits of the plan, and ask for input
- **16** WEEKS BEFORE LAUNCH: Hire a consultant if necessary, interview insurance & legal teams
- **14** WEEKS BEFORE LAUNCH: Task force meets to go over findings
- **13** WEEKS BEFORE LAUNCH: Task force meets to outline plan
- **12** WEEKS BEFORE LAUNCH: Select someone to write it or divide it into parts and assign parts to different writers
- **12** WEEKS BEFORE LAUNCH: Write plan
- **9** WEEKS BEFORE LAUNCH: Task force edits plan, send to legal and insurance for approval
- **7** WEEKS BEFORE LAUNCH: Send to staff for comment/buy-in along with another message about benefits
- **7** WEEKS BEFORE LAUNCH: Set training schedule/select trainers (should professional trainers be hired?)
- **5** WEEKS BEFORE LAUNCH: Make changes as necessary to plan
- **4** WEEKS BEFORE LAUNCH: Train the trainers
- **2** WEEKS BEFORE LAUNCH: Train staff
- **0** LAUNCH: Full plan implementation



Ask questions that help determine if a patient is frail or a fall risk. Cover dietary issues and other concerns, such as obesity, mobility, psychosocial risk, and behavioral risk. The World Health Organization (WHO) recommends further questions about burn risk, underlying medical conditions, cognitive disabilities, and whether the patient abuses alcohol or uses tobacco. When the assessment is complete, you want a full evaluation of the patient so you can determine what they need from your company.

According to the Department of Health and Human Services, a good plan should:

- Be individualized
- Specify the services necessary to address the patient's needs identified in the assessment
- Include measurable and expected outcomes
- Include estimated timetables to achieve outcomes
- Contain outcomes consistent with current evidence-based, professionally accepted clinical practice standards

Training

After defining the assessment plan and its specific questions, attention should turn to training your staff. Whether your company hires an outside firm to train or decides to use in-house instructors, employees should be kept abreast of how training will happen and when. They should also be made aware of the goals of training. This includes what is expected of them and the timeline for implementation. As with many aspects of running a business, the more you communicate with staff the better the outcome. If it feels like you are over-communicating with your employees, you are probably doing it right.

There are many ways to train your team. Begin with the vocabulary of the plan. Create a glossary so everyone is literally speaking the same language. Go over the assessment plan and teach the team to properly interview the clients. The assessment will only be as good as the answers you receive. Conduct role-play or other exercises to ensure that the team understands how to conduct the assessment, and then how to analyze it for the best results. Next, show them how to interpret the data provided and use examples. Consider having community health professionals or others come in to assist with the training. Your team should be taught how to apply critical thinking to make good decisions. One example is the crucial choice of matching the specific caregiver to the patient. If a patient has mobility issues, assign someone who has the physical abilities to move them as needed. If a patient is facing end-of-life issues, assign someone with hospice experience.

Implementation

Once the team is trained, it is time to implement the patient assessment plan.

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FRAMEWORK FOR PATIENT-CENTERED HEALTH RISK ASSESSMENTS

The Department of Health and Human Services has published a public policy document that advises caregivers how to conduct patient assessments. Here are recommendations from the paper:

1. Balance comprehensiveness of assessment with provider and patient burden
2. Build upon high priority questions
3. Use person-centered and culturally appropriate processes
4. Comply with all federal laws and regulations regarding access for persons with disabilities
5. Use a shared decision-making process
6. Offer training to health providers
7. Offer action-oriented information
8. Use principles of quality improvement
9. Incorporate information into secure electronic health records
10. Conduct research to quantify long-term outcomes

Source: cdc.gov/policy/hst/HRA/FrameworkForHRA.pdf

As always, the goal is to provide your clients with the best possible care.

It will be necessary to participate more when the plan is first introduced. Insure that your team is successfully identifying at-risk patients. They should use their new knowledge to determine if a patient is a fall risk, has special transportation needs, or is at particular risk for scalding or other serious incidents. This diligence protects the patient, and it protects your business from negligence suits. Your insurance company can help you determine if you are properly covered for any unforeseen events. Providing patients with extra preventative care will benefit everyone. During the treatment period, keep an eye on patient trends. If your patients have certain difficulties, like dementia, and your team does not have the skills to meet the needs, train the team. Then, hire appropriately in the future.

Evaluation

After your company has successfully launched and implemented a new patient assessment plan, the work is not complete. A good assessment strategy requires continual evaluation. Assign a task force to follow up and follow the data. Learn from mistakes and change the questions as needed. Issue information to employees with every change. While you can make corrections to the assessment along the way, an annual review is recommended. Study patient outcomes and incidents, how incidents were handled and where improvements could be made. Hold annual training to refresh employee knowledge of the plan, and to go over changes. And, of course, when new employees are hired, train them immediately.

Conclusion

It is vital for caregivers to remember to be compassionate and patient. But it takes even more than that to institute a working patient assessment plan process. Practicing active listening can improve patient outcomes and will insure that implementation goes as well as it possibly can. As always, the goal is to provide your clients with the best possible care. A successful patient care assessment is only part of what it takes to achieve that goal. Real caring, listening, and respect are also key elements to the success of your company, your employees, and the long-term well being of your patients.