JOINT COMMISSION™
ELEVATING CARE. TOGETHER.

Culture of Safety

Fostering a shared commitment to safety at every level — where proactive risk prevention, open communication, and accountability are embedded in daily practices and decision-making — is essential for healthcare organizations to reduce medical errors, prevent staff burnout, and promote greater job satisfaction. However, persistent challenges continue to hinder effective collaboration, which can undermine these efforts. Establishing and adhering to clear quality standards plays a vital role in aligning teams, guiding consistent practices, and reinforcing a unified approach to patient safety and care excellence.

Background

Joint Commission culture of safety standards, launched in 2010, aim to foster a robust, positive culture of safety in healthcare settings. Evidence shows that active leadership involvement in structured safety processes significantly improves both patient outcomes and workforce well-being. To support this, Joint Commission's standards emphasize strong, visible leadership commitment as essential to overcoming persistent challenges that compromise patient care and safety.

Standards

The Culture of *Safety National Performance Goal™*, developed with broad healthcare stakeholder input, helps leadership foster and maintain a culture of safety that improves patient and workforce safety and quality. Specifically, Joint Commission standards require hospital leaders to:

- Regularly measure and evaluate safety culture using valid and reliable tools
- Develop and communicate the hospital's mission, vision, and goals to staff to guide actions
- Ensure the medical staff are represented in the hospital's governing body
- Address conflicts of interest and ethics
- Design a comprehensive safety program and work processes to focus individuals on safety and quality issues

Joint Commission's Workplace Violence Prevention standards,* added in 2022, work synergistically with the other culture of safety standards and address the recent rise of workplace violence.

*requirements outlined in Workplace Violence addendum

- Develop and enforce a code of conduct applicable to both patients and staff that defines unacceptable behavior, including intimidating behaviors, and take actions to prevent/mitigate such behaviors

- Maintain a workplace violence program (see call out box)

Rationale

- A poor safety culture in hospitals can create conditions that lead to negative patient outcomes, such as increased medical errors, adverse patient events, higher rates of patient injuries, staff burnout, decreased staff morale, reduced quality of care, legal issues, and reputational damage that can ultimately risk patient death.[i,ii]

- The Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality's research demonstrates that organizations with better safety cultures significantly improve multiple patient outcomes,[iii] including fewer hospital-acquired pressure ulcers,[iv] fewer patient falls,[v] lower surgical infection rates,[vi] and fewer medication errors.[vii]

- Safety culture also benefits workers, resulting in fewer sharp-related and other injuries, better job satisfaction, improved staff retention, better reporting of safety events, and reduced burnout[viii]— contributing to greater healthcare worker retention and patient well-being.[ix]

Related Activities

- Joint Commission has partnered with OSHA through the Alliance Program Ambassador relationship since 2004.[x] This collaborative working relationship enables the dissemination of consistent and accurate resources available to protect the safety and health of the workforce.[xi] See: OSHA and Joint Commission Alliance

- The 2021 updated *Sentinel Event Alert* from Joint Commission identifies behaviors that can undermine safety culture, such as verbal outbursts, physical threats, refusal to perform assigned tasks, and others.[xii]

- A workforce safety and well-being resource center by Joint Commission provides curated educational resources and specific strategies, tools, and best practices to support healthcare organizations.

- Joint Commission's Chief Medical Officer participates in the national patient safety and harm reduction dialogue through her participation in the Institute of Healthcare Improvement (IHI) National Steering Committee for Patient Safety.

i Layne DM, Nemeth LS, Mueller M, Martin M. Negative Behaviors among Healthcare Professionals: Relationship with Patient Safety Culture. Healthcare (Basel). 2019 Feb 1;7(1):23. doi: 10.3390/healthcare7010023. PMID: 30717313; PMCID: PMC6473815 ii Mistri IU, Badge A, Shahu S. Enhancing Patient Safety Culture in Hospitals. Cureus. 2023 Dec 27;15(12): e51159. doi: 10.7759/cureus.51159. PMID: 38283419; PMCID: PMC10811440
iii Murray J, Sorra J, Gale B, et al. Ensuring Patient and Workforce Safety Culture in Healthcare. PSNet [internet]. Rockville (MD): Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality, US Department of Health and Human Services 2024
iv Alanazi FK, Lapkin S, Molloy L, Sim J. Safety culture, quality of care, missed care, nurse staffing and their impact on pressure injuries: A cross-sectional multi-source study. Int J Nurs Stud Adv. 2023; 5:100125. doi: 10.1016/j.ijnsa.2023.100125 v Brown DS, Wolosin R. Safety culture relationships with hospital nursing sensitive metrics. J Healthc Qual. 2013 JulAug;35(4):61–74. doi: 10.1111/jhq.12016 vi Fan CJ, Pawlik TM, Daniels T, Vernon N, Banks K, Westby P, Wick EC, Sexton JB, Makary MA. Association of safety culture with surgical site infection outcomes. J Am Coll Surg. 2016 Feb;222(2):122–8. https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/26712245/ vii Alanazi FK, Sim J, Lapkin S. Systematic review: Nurses' safety attitudes and their impact on patient outcomes in acute-care hospitals. Nurs Open. 2022;9(1):30-43. doi: 10.1002/nop2.1063 viii Hessels AJ, Wurmser T. Relationship among safety culture, nursing care, and Standard Precautions adherence. Does J Infect Control. 2020;48(3):340–341. doi: 10.1016/j.ajic.2019.11.008 ix ECRI's top 10 patient safety concerns for 2024. (March 2024). https://home.ecri.org/blogs/ecri-blog/ecri-s-top-10-patient-safety-concerns-for-2024 x US Department of Labor. Occupational Safety and Health Administration. Active National Alliances and Ambassadors. The Joint Commission (TJC) and Joint Commission Resources (JCR). Renewed November 9, 2022. https://www.osha.gov/alliances/jcaho/jcaho xi The Joint Commission (TJC) and Joint Commission Resources, Inc. (JCR) | OSHA.gov | Occupational Safety and Health Administration xii The Joint Commission Sentinel Event Alert. Issue 40, original publication July 9, 2008, updated June 2018. Behaviors that undermine a culture of safety. https://www.jointcommission.org/-/media/tjc/documents/resources/patient-safety-topics/sentinel-event/sea-40-intimidating-disruptive-behaviors-final2.pdf

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*National Patient Safety Goals are now a part of the National Performance Goals.

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