Implementing Education in your Sterile Processing Department

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Education is typically a top priority for most managers and leadership in a Central Service (CS) department; however, implementing education in CS can be difficult. Challenges can range from lack of time to not enough staff readily available to process instruments, let alone carve out time for education. We at Advantage Support Services have interviewed many managers over the years and education is always stated as a priority, but when we would further discuss the education plan for the facility, we discovered that the managers wore many hats. What that meant was that even though education was a priority, it was one of many -- and it often was moved to the bottom of the lists.

A recent Health Advisory posted by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) stated that CS departments should be assessed by “healthcare professional with expertise in device reprocessing.” It went on to state that during assessments, training assessments should be included to ensure that “healthcare facilities provide training to all personnel who reprocess medical devices. Training should be required and provided, upon hire... at least once a year and when new devices or protocols are introduced.”

Prioritizing professionalism

Planning is a necessary first step in developing an effective educational program. Thanks to IAHCSMM, planning has been made quite simple. Each of IAHCSMM’s certification manuals provide a syllabus for following one chapter at a time. Outsourcing is another possible solution for facilities that may not have the ability to concentrate their efforts on in-house education. There are several online educational programs available, as well as educators who will come to a facility to not only plan for education, but implement courses on a weekly basis.

The Director of Surgical Support Services at Children’s Healthcare of Atlanta (CHOA), Jhmeid Billingslea, has not only implemented an effective educational program, but has also helped empower staff to take ownership of the sterilization processes in the department. Billingslea’s departmental staff, like many others across the country, have also attained Certified Registered Central Service Technician (CRCST) status. What he discovered, however, was a number of technicians waiting to the last minute to gather the continuing education units required to maintain their hard-earned certification. Waiting until right before the certification was due to expire not only put their CRCST status in jeopardy, but also led Billingslea question how much of the educational information these time-crunch employees were retaining.

As a departmental leader, he saw the importance of having leaders step up and provide education for their staff. He became increasingly motivated to find solutions and implement education throughout the year to help staff stay on top of their certification and sharpen their knowledge and skill sets. In the four campuses at CHOA, he identified 17 staff members who had maintained their certification and could be groomed for a leadership role. As the director noted, “Due to each being certified, they each knew the IACSM manual and how to prepare for certification. They all knew what to educate.” The IAHCSMM
manual provides a clear, concise path to gaining the knowledge necessary to attain certification. Each chapter provides objectives that specifically define the information that must be retained.

**Education for staff, by staff**

The CHOA Central Processing department initiated education for staff, by staff. Each leader identified, planned and implemented education through one inservice. The inservices were presented to IAHCSMM for an approved CE unit, which helped technicians maintain their certification. The hospital administrators supported the department’s certification by initiating a “Pay to Study Program,” which reimburses each staff member for the cost of the certification manual. As the staff studies at home, they can log those hours of study and receive compensation as they go, until the dollar amount reaches the cost of the manual. The program not only incentivizes staff to become certified, but enhances staff accountability and confidence. The staff could take pride in knowing they invested in themselves – and that the facility recognized their efforts.

Implementing the program has not only helped staff maintain certification, it has also helped staff take greater ownership of the department’s many processes and see themselves as the true instrumentation and reprocessing experts they are. Since the program’s inception, the facility has developed a solid reputation as an education-focused leader. The team was a standout presence at the last IAHCSMM Georgia Chapter meeting, with CHOA staff holding the highest attendance from one hospital system.

**In Conclusion**

Implementing education can seem like a daunting task, especially considering all the other important duties that Central Service managers and other leaders must urgently attend to on a daily basis. But with some thoughtful planning and creativity, facilities can develop an effective educational program that keeps staff abreast of standards and best practices, and helps them meet their certification renewal requirements.

The need for continuing education is great, but the desire to meet that need must be greater. All that’s needed is a CS leader who’s willing to keep education a top priority and begin taking steps to create a program that’s effective and accessible to staff.