Don’t Overlook CS Professionals During Quality Assessments

This year, the IAHCSMM Annual Conference & Expo was in Advantage Support’s home town of Nashville. At the conference’s conclusion, I left feeling excited about the sterile processing profession’s future. IACHSMM’s devotion to Central Service (CS) professionals was clearly visible throughout the entire conference. Each speaker and event – not to mention, the one-on-one support the IAHCSMM team provided daily -- was excellent and all details were handled with obvious care.

The Conference & Expo served as the perfect backdrop for attendees (nearly 1,400 of them) to gather to share their stories and best practices, seek solutions and connect on a personal level. I would like to personally extend my sincere gratitude to IAHCSMM for providing a knowledge-building and networking opportunity for all of us in CS. My positive experience from the conference prompted me to write this article and share the importance of building strong connections – with our colleagues, customers and peers, as well as with our instruments, equipment, processes and quality checkpoints.

Power to the people

Recently, I had an opportunity to review an assessment study. The document addressed many factors that could benefit a CS department (e.g., how much space would be needed to accommodate all equipment and processes, and how much equipment would be needed to process instruments effectively and efficiently). It was a solid review that delivered beneficial perspective on how the CS department could serve its customers and patients now and in the future. As I reflected on the data presented, however, I realized that the CS professionals were not included in the report. This was a challenge for me because when I perform assessments, processes and staff input are a large part of my data collection.

The success of any healthcare department, including CS, is dependent upon the professionals who work there. In fact, these individuals are more important than any equipment or process. Effective CS technicians are detail oriented and always willing to go to battle against microorganisms. They are also willing to help their teammates to get a difficult job done safely and effectively, and to share standards-based information with their healthcare customers about safe, effective reprocessing practices. The demand for quality and professionalism never wanes.

CS employees are so vital to success and patient safety that Advantage Support’s assessments always include data from people, products and process. All are essential for helping the department delivery clean, sterile, on-time and complete items to end users. When initiating an assessment of the department, I begin by evaluating the knowledge base of the technicians and departmental leaders. Knowledge of the practical applications of decontamination and sterilization processes is as important as understanding the sciences behind cleaning and sterilization. IAHCSMM and the Association of periOperative Registered Nurses (AORN) state that “Personnel involved in reprocessing should be knowledgeable and capable of exercising critical thinking and judgment, and should implement standardized practices. The supervising organization is responsible for ensuring appropriate training, education, and competency of staff and ensuring that the necessary related resources are provided.”

Ongoing education is essential for long-term success in CS, and certification (the gold standard in our profession) is also invaluable. IAHCSMM has done an exceptional job at advocating for certification of CS technicians at the state (and individual facility) level, providing top-quality educational opportunities,
and offering certifications to help ensure that CS professionals possess the essential knowledge and skills necessary for managing critical departmental duties safely, effectively and consistently. The ongoing education required for CS professionals to maintain their certification status also helps ensure that CS professionals stay on top of evolving instrumentation, technology, standards and best practices to keep CS departments functioning optimally. Each time I conduct an assessment, I assess employees’ knowledge and skill sets, as well as the specific steps taken in each process in the department.

I also assess how the department promotes accountability and professionalism of its CS professionals. I explore teamwork and communication between CS employees and their customers. I also evaluate staffing levels set by leadership and the quality check points applied throughout the all departmental processes. Each of these assessment points correlate directly to throughput and delivery of quality products to the end user. Often, throughput is considered an end result of the mechanical equipment that processes instrumentation; however, the quality of the instrumentation received can be less than desirable if employees are falling short in either knowledge or practice. A rongeur in the decontamination area can serve as a perfect example.

If bone is not removed for the rongeur at the point of use, that bone will be transported with the rongeur to the decontamination area. If the technician in the decontamination area fails to inspect the rongeur and remove the bone in order to clean and decontaminate it properly, the bone in the rongeur will then enter a mechanical washer. If the technician attempts to process more instruments in the washer than is permitted by the manufacturer (in the instructions for use) or places the item in the tray improperly, the bone may not be removed from the rongeur. The technician’s role in respect to education, practical application of knowledge, professionalism, accountability and quality checks comes together to provide clean, sterile and well-functioning items.

In Conclusion

Departmental assessments are invaluable for identifying areas of improvement; however, these assessments will fall short if they don’t also take into careful consideration the employees who work in the CS department. Assessing knowledge, competency and even certification status can help demonstrate that the CS team is able to apply science and standards-based processes and practices effectively, safely and consistently. This will promote the highest quality service and products to healthcare customers and patients.