

5 tips for proactive OSHA compliance

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Medical groups have the best intentions when it comes to ensuring worker safety. That said, the frenetic pace of the typical practice often leads many struggling to find time to pursue Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) compliance measures and foster a safe work environment.

At the same time, these organizations are frequently in denial about the risks present in their facilities, thinking that a safety incident or OSHA inspection could never happen to them given their smaller size.

The result: Practices regularly underestimate the potential impact of putting worker safety on the back burner, leaving them open to audits, safety issues and financial penalties.

Implications of noncompliance

Failing to prioritize and meet OSHA's worker safety regulations can have severe consequences for any healthcare organization, especially smaller medical practices. When discovered, a safety lapse can result in stiff penalties adding up to thousands of dollars, for instance. By not consistently following OSHA requirements, medical practices fall short in establishing a healthful environment for employees. This puts both their staff and patients at risk. Over time, safety lapses and compliance shortfalls can lead to staff and patient dissatisfaction, as well as attrition. If workers leave due to illness, injury or frustration, the practice must spend money -- sometimes significant sums -- hiring and retraining new workers, adding to the expense of noncompliance.

What's tripping practices up?

About two-thirds of federal OSHA citations in physician practices relate to the blood-borne pathogens standard, which demands organizations implement strategies to prevent staff exposure to harmful pathogens like viruses and bacterial diseases. Unfortunately, many medical practices do not sufficiently address the standard's requirements and needle stick injuries, scalpel cuts and other incidents continue to occur. In fact, this standard is the most frequent OSHA citation given in physician practices, resulting in significant penalties annually.

To put this in further context, the next most frequently cited OSHA requirement is the hazard communication standard, which governs labeling and communication about dangerous chemicals and other materials. Citations and penalties relating to noncompliance with this standard's requirements, while significantly lower than blood-borne pathogens noncompliance, still constitute a considerable risk should practices not be properly prepared.

Although physician practices must meet all relevant OSHA requirements, the blood-borne pathogens standard represents the best place to start. If medical practices focused more on better complying with this standard, they could dramatically reduce the likelihood of safety lapses and OSHA violations.

Key strategies for ensuring worker safety

Realizing consistent OSHA compliance requires leadership commitment and a comprehensive and intentional plan.

Following are a few essential strategies for getting started:

1. Create a written policy. If a medical practice undergoes an OSHA audit, the first thing the inspecting officer will likely do upon entering the facility is ask to see the organization's written exposure control plan, a key element in blood-borne pathogens standard compliance. Not only must physician practices have such a plan accessible, but they also must keep it current, reassessing it annually. While creating and reviewing this type of plan may seem daunting, there are technology solutions available that walk an organization through plan development. When using these solutions, the person creating the plan does not need to be an OSHA expert and can rely on the software to guide them through developing a comprehensive and compliant document.

2. Seek best practices. Ensuring a safe environment for workers is not a new concept. Many healthcare organizations have discovered reliable and common sense processes that safeguard employees and can be applied to other practices. For example, establishing clear hand hygiene rules can significantly reduce staff exposure. Similarly, designating specific refrigerators for food and others for blood supplies is an easy way to limit contamination. Additional simple rules like "no food in the laboratory" or "no application of cosmetics in treatment areas" can also cut exposure risk. Medical practices should look for some of these best practices and apply them in their settings. Good sources may include the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the Association for Professionals in Infection Control and Epidemiology (APIC), professional societies and other physician practices.

3. Employ engineering controls. One of the most effective ways to limit the spread of blood-borne pathogens is to leverage engineering controls -- mechanically designed instruments that mitigate exposure risks. Some examples might include safety needles and safety scalpels that retract when not in use. Blade removal devices are also beneficial as these automatically remove sharp blades without user interaction. Although these tools cost money and may take a little getting used to, they are helpful in limiting contact and protecting staff.

4. Use PPE correctly. Personal protective equipment (PPE) can limit hazard exposure. However, to be truly effective, users must employ it properly each and every time--which is all but impossible considering the inevitability of human error. Robust training is one method for enhancing PPE reliability; however this can only take an organization so far. In addition, staff may want to partner when donning PPE and designate a "watcher" who double checks that the other staff person puts on and removes the equipment the right way.

5. Provide interactive training. OSHA mandates that organizations provide training for staff each year, often covering consistent topics. This can become old hat for some, so it's important to make training interesting, accessible and easy to understand. Like policy development, technology solutions can help as there are programs that organizations can access to offer online, interactive and interesting training.

Moving beyond an afterthought

Complying with OSHA regulations is a must-do for any physician practice as the risks involved with noncompliance are just too great.

By taking a methodical approach and seeking assistance from outside resources, medical practices can implement a well-tuned program that elevates worker safety and mitigates risk.

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