Crossing Borders, Cultures and Business Models

The importance of standardization in healthcare

by Kristi Groves

Spending several years working overseas for the Department of Defense as a nurse and nurse leader, and learning quality for healthcare, I developed a new appreciation for standardization or limiting variation in healthcare practices—in business and clinical settings.

This appreciation stemmed from the vastness of the healthcare system I worked for and the international bodies that governed some of our practices while overseas. My interest in standardization was not only for my professional role as a nurse, but also for the patients I cared for.

As I’ve continued gathering nursing and quality experience back in the United States, I still find value in standardization and limiting variation in any healthcare system process. That’s the result of my learning more about the International Organization for Standardization (ISO) and the ISO 9001 standard for quality management systems, which is used in healthcare organizations and businesses alike.

I began learning about ISO while managing clinical settings in Europe and Asia. This began in the world of environmental management practices related to ISO 14001; we knew it affectionately as the Global Environmental Management System program. Moving from continent to continent was smoother in one area that affected clinical life—the area of environmental management—because of the adoption of an international standard.

ISO 14001 reminded the clinical professional side of me of evidence-based practice. Like evidence-based practice, ISO 14001 offers proven methods to enhance standardization and limit negative impacts, although in ways other than in direct patient care. I soon learned the ISO 14001 standard was truly global as I transferred from Europe to Asia and then back to the United States. I witnessed that the ISO 14001 standard also crossed borders, cultures and different business models easily and effectively.
It was shortly after I transferred back to the United States that I was introduced to another ISO standard, ISO 9001, which is related to quality management systems. This standard is as easily transferable to worldwide healthcare processes and systems as ISO 14001.

As we learn in lean processes, the more that variation is limited, the easier that changes and improvements can be made. Within healthcare, evidence-based practices are more easily and effectively implemented when standardization is present.

So what have I learned about ISO 9001 in healthcare? The healthcare systems I have been fortunate to work with that have adopted ISO 9001 principles into their processes see sustainability in improvement and quality efforts, continued readiness for audits and repeatable processes.

Common goals for the employees in all departments of these hospitals are apparent because of the quality objectives that are adopted through ISO 9001 implementation. The best part is that none of these requirements are prescriptive. The ISO 9001 standard does not tell us how to do anything, but rather instructs us to take these things into consideration and fit the requirements to our situation.

ISO 9001, like ISO 14001, crosses borders, cultures and different business models. Those in healthcare are aware that clinical outcomes can vary because they are human-dependent, and healthcare professionals can never completely predict what can happen with our patients as we care for them.

But, healthcare professionals can standardize many processes to ensure those processes are controlled and we can better handle those situations that are not within our control. Not only will controlling processes through limiting variation in healthcare business benefit the healthcare industry, but also it will ultimately benefit patients. And really, isn’t that what our job is all about?

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