
Distractions in the Workplace

By Julie Loomis, RN, JD

Distractions and interruptions are a fact of life in today's healthcare environment, but that doesn't mean a practice should simply accept them and the threat they pose to patient safety. Identifying the sources and frequency of distractions and interruptions allows for implementation of strategies to avoid or minimize at least some of them. Reviewing the use of personal electronic devices is an area of "low hanging fruit" where relatively straightforward, low-cost behavior modifications can make a significant difference.

While no one disputes that new technologies may bring a host of advantages to the clinical setting, adding them to an already chaotic healthcare environment can also interrupt workflow and distract from good patient care. As public awareness of this risk has grown, reports of near misses and medical errors resulting from the use of technology have increased. We now see advertisements encouraging anyone who believes they suffered a medical injury resulting from distraction to contact an experienced malpractice attorney, and plaintiffs' attorneys use the discovery process during litigation to request the cell phone records of physicians which may be used as evidence. Several healthcare organizations have developed guidelines on the use of new technologies and a number of professional organizations, such as the [American College of Surgery](#) and the [American Association of Nurse Anesthetists](#), have issued position statements regarding the use of mobile devices.

So how is this technology affecting your medical practice and how will you control the use of personal electronic devices in your medical setting? The first step is to educate clinicians and staff regarding the dangers of non-essential use of devices and the significant patient safety lapses they can cause. The next step involves an assessment of the potential risks based on the usage behaviors and patterns of your healthcare professionals. The results of your assessment will drive the policies needed, and those policies should clearly define what is acceptable behavior, what is unacceptable behavior and the consequences for breaching the policy.

The contents of The Sentinel are intended for educational/informational purposes only and do not constitute legal advice. Policyholders are urged to consult with their personal attorney for legal advice, as specific legal requirements may vary from state to state and/or change over time.