
Avoid Drifting into Unsafe Habits

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Have you or your staff been “drifting into unsafe habits?” Do you follow the template generated by your EHR without questioning its validity or applicability to the patient in front of you? Do you ignore alerts and other prompts? Do you ask only close-ended questions of patients such as, “Are all of your medications still the same?” If you answered yes to any of these questions, you could be drifting into unsafe habits and putting your patients at higher risk of harm.

According to The Institute of Safe Medicine Practices[1], behavioral research shows that we are programmed to drift into unsafe habits, to lose perception of the risk attached to everyday behaviors, or mistakenly believe the risk to be justified. In general, workers are most concerned with the immediate and certain consequences of their behavior—saved time, for example—and undervalue delayed or uncertain consequences, such as patient harm. Their decisions about what is important on a daily list of tasks are based on the immediate desired outcomes. Over time, as perceptions of risk fade away and workers try to do more with less, they may tend to take shortcuts and drift away from behaviors they know are safer.

Simply ask yourself “why” you do it this way? Why is this policy in place? It’s important that policies are consistently followed and periodically revisited. Educate all staff on the intention behind the policy so he or she will have a better understanding of the potential for harm when policies are not followed.

Although it will take a little extra time, increasing your attention to detail and evaluating areas where you could be missing opportunities to provide safer care will pay off in the long run.

[1] <http://www.ismp.org/newsletters/acutecare/articles/20060921.asp>

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