

# TEXAS HEALTHCARE TRUSTEES Trustee Bulletin

## QUALITY: A Trustee Imperative

In health care, few challenges are as complex as quality care. Medical errors and sentinel events are among the most sensitive and costly of all health care issues. Additionally, scrutiny by patients, purchasers, regulatory agencies and the general public has increased. Yet, armed with the right tools, hospital and health system trustees can ensure that their organizations are committed to quality care and have processes in place to ensure quality care is being delivered.

"Board members have an obligation to understand the level of quality and service that their organizations deliver. Quality is not only a key issue in health care today, but also is paramount to a hospital's mission and its governing board's fiduciary duties," said Eric Lister, M.D., a quality expert and recent speaker at the Texas Healthcare Trustees Summer Forum in August.

"The days when boards could just receive reports and scan them are over," he explained. "Boards, by virtue of their unique authority with respect to quality, need to be prepared to exert a level of involvement beyond oversight of the executive team and the passive receipt of reports from the medical staff. They must take an active role," he emphasized.

### The Board's Role

Health care quality has been an issue for decades, but accountability for health care quality is a relatively new board responsibility. In fact, current Joint Commission on Accreditation of Healthcare Organizations standards state, "A hospital's governing body ultimately is responsible for the quality of care that a hospital provides."

In July, the Joint Commission Board of Commissioners approved six national patient safety goals, further reinforcing the need for health care leaders to be accountable.

### Embracing the Quality Mission

According to Lister, being responsible doesn't mean "trustees peek over the surgeon's shoulder in the OR. A trustee's job is to create a system of oversight," he explains.

He added, "Being responsible does not require one to be an expert in content, but rather demands the design and implementation of a rigorous, proactive and effective oversight loop." Lister suggested that the first step a health care board must do is "embrace the quality mission and establish quality as a priority."

Lister said that when a board of trustees commits itself to assure quality, it should request that hospital

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## TrusteeBulletin

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management create a blueprint which will:

- outline practical steps to manage quality in measurable and demonstrable ways; and
- identify the resources to implement and monitor the interventions.

### Transforming the Culture

The most visible responsibility that the Joint Commission has assigned to board members is to transform the culture of their organizations where everyone participates fully in reporting medical errors or near misses. When it comes to changing cultures, "having a road map and ongoing dialogue about quality throughout your organization makes all the difference," said Lister.

Today's hospital and health care system boards take great steps to ensure quality and safety, but research shows that most quality problems in hospitals are not the result of individual error. Rather, the majority of quality problems are caused by the breakdown of processes and systems of care that are complex and involve many people. Consequently, trustees are encouraged to create health care environments that support error identification and offer solutions to prevent errors from recurring, while minimizing individual blame or retribution for reporting them. Activities can include:

- articulating organizational values;
- creating appropriate policies;
- measuring and tracking key variables;
- hiring and rewarding an executive team based upon the advancement of those values; and

- establishing expectations for the medical staff consistent with those values.

### Joint Commission Patient Safety Standards

Beginning on Jan. 1, 2003, compliance with six new patient safety goals approved by the Joint Commission Board of Commissioners will be assessed in all Joint Commission-surveyed organizations. The goals and recommendations, which were announced in July, are effective for one year and cover the following areas:

- Improve the accuracy of patient identification.
- Improve the effectiveness of communication among caregivers.
- Improve the safety of using high-alert medications.
- Eliminate wrong-site, wrong-patient, wrong procedure surgery.
- Update the effectiveness of clinical alarm systems.
- Improve the safety of using infusion pumps.

### Questions for Trustees

As an outgrowth of patient safety, the Joint Commission has developed a set of key questions for hospital trustees and board members. The following questions have been adapted and currently are incorporated into the on-site survey protocols for use in interviewing hospital leaders.

- What percent of the hospital's annual operating budget is devoted to patient safety activities?