

ALTA NEWS

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TN hospitals laying foundation for continuously improving care

BY CRAIG A. BECKER

The Tennessee Surgical Quality Collaborative, which is coordinated by the Tennessee Hospital Association's (THA) Tennessee Center for Patient Safety, was lauded last month in the *Journal of the American College of Surgeons* as "a regional collaborative that has achieved sustainable improvements in surgical outcomes, such as reducing the rates of acute renal failure and surgical site infections."

This recognition came after THA was one of 26 organizations chosen last December to receive a Partnership for Patients hospital engagement network (HEN) contract to build on the Tennessee Center for Patient Safety's progress in "making health care safer and less costly by targeting and reducing preventable injuries and complications" from hospital-acquired conditions. The Tennessee Department of Health publicly reported in November that Tennessee hospitals

"reduced the rates of healthcare-associated infections significantly between 2008 and 2011."

It seems we are beginning to see the fruits of our labor on the patient safety front, not just in Tennessee, but in many other states.

Our effort began five years ago when THA's board made a firm commitment to support a statewide effort to create the Tennessee Center for Patient Safety. The mission of the center is to advance Tennessee hospitals' adoption of proven strategies to enhance the care received by patients. Priority is given to initiatives designed to measurably improve care for patients and proactively position hospitals for performance on publicly reported national quality measures.

The BlueCross BlueShield of Tennessee Health Foundation joined THA by agreeing to provide leadership funding for the center's first three years of operation. BlueCross viewed this partnership as an important step toward improving the reliability, safety and quality of



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care received by the patients in the state. BlueCross also funded the Tennessee Surgical Quality Collaborative with the Tennessee chapter of the American College of Surgeons.

We are just now at a point where we can begin to reflect on what we have learned and what will be required as we continue this marathon journey. Hospitals have learned this isn't easy work. It requires a culture shift where professionals discuss and learn from their own errors and "near misses." That is not an easy thing to do in any profession, but it is particularly difficult when lives are at stake each day.

Over the past five years, Tennessee hospitals have shifted from the conviction that a certain amount of error is unavoidable to an attitude that they can improve. With that change comes a conviction that

hospitals will not stop until they have achieved zero incidents of preventable harm.

We have learned there are two dimensions of improvement. There is the technical side of patient safety - clinical evidence-based practices, as well as aids and technology that enable process improvement. However, process improvement alone will not achieve the "zero goal."

The second dimension - adaptively work - where we change values, beliefs and behaviors is equally important. As hospitals blend those two dimensions, they have witnessed wonderfully committed professionals working together in a complex system accomplishing levels of quality in care that were unheard of only a decade ago.

Here's what we know:

- The THA board unanimously endorsed the objective of zero preventable harm.

- Getting the work of patient safety to the front lines of care so it is not viewed as just another program

that goes on the shelf after it has been checked off of everyone's to-do list has enabled the integration of patient safety behaviors with daily work at the bedside.

- Encouraging hospitals to share patient safety practices that work for them, despite the fact that those same hospitals operate in a competitive marketplace, has raised the standard.

- Bringing together a variety of professional partners, such as Tennessee's quality improvement organization, the Tennessee Department of Health, BlueCross BlueShield of Tennessee, Tennessee CMO Society, Tennessee Nurses Association, Tennessee Chapter of the American College of Surgeons and others, has given everyone a vested interest in the ultimate common goal of reducing harm to patients.

We cannot adequately describe our association's success without acknowledging our leaders' outstanding work. The Tennessee Center for Patient Safety staff is work-

ing tirelessly on the front lines across our state to demonstrate these efforts are paying dividends.

Peter Pronovost, M.D., and Chris Goeschel of Johns Hopkins' Armstrong Institute for Patient Safety and Quality have been invaluable resources, as has Sorrel King, who authored "Joste's Story," a first-hand account of hospital error that claimed her precious daughter's life.

Leadership at all levels among more than 120 of Tennessee's hospitals, combined with physician and nurse participation, has created an environment that empowers thousands to change their behavior and seize the opportunity to make our hospitals truly safe.

Patient safety is not a sprint. Perhaps it is not even a journey. Today, patient safety is an integral part of who we are as caregivers and professionals. It is why we got into this calling in the first place.

Becker is president and CEO of the Tennessee Hospital Association and an AHA board member.