



Workplace Safety and Risk Management for Home Healthcare Workers

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Health care workers face a wide range of hazards on the job, including travel, care administration injuries, back injuries, latex allergy, violence, and stress. Although it is possible to prevent or minimize home health care worker exposure to these hazards, today healthcare workers actually are experiencing increasing numbers of occupational injuries and illnesses. Rates of occupational injury to healthcare workers have risen over the past decade. By contrast, two of the most hazardous industries, agriculture and construction, are safer today than they were a decade ago.

Workplace Safety & Risk Management

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“Health care is the second-fastest-growing sector of the U.S. economy, employing over 12 million workers. Within health care, Home health care is one of the fastest expanding areas, at least partially due to aging population. The Bureau of Labor Statistics has estimated that home healthcare employment will grow 55% between 2006-2016, making it the fastest growing occupation of the next decade” [National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH)]. The situation is similar in Canada, with the initiatives to shift more care to the home setting.

While home care is without a doubt a good solution for providing quality care to clients in the comfort of their own home and mitigating the high cost of managed care, it has its own challenges. One of them is managing the personal safety and health risks for home health care workers while working in a client’s home. Nurses and home care staff work in a decentralized environment 24/7 with unknown factors. Transportation to remote client locations, weather conditions and extended work hours provide additional risks to the home and community worker.

The following is a brief summary of hazards that Home health care workers (HCWs) are potentially exposed to:

- **Biological hazards** – infective diseases, blood borne pathogens, needle stick injury
- **Chemical Hazards** – hazardous drugs, cleaning and sterilizing agents
- **Physical Hazards** – workplace injury: “slips, trips, falls”, overexertion, back injury, temperature extremes; unhygienic conditions (including lack of water, unclean or hostile animals, and animal waste); long commutes from worksite to worksite adding transportation-related risks.
- **Psychological Hazards** – occupational stress, workplace violence, guns and other weapons; illegal drugs; verbal abuse and other forms of violence in the home or community

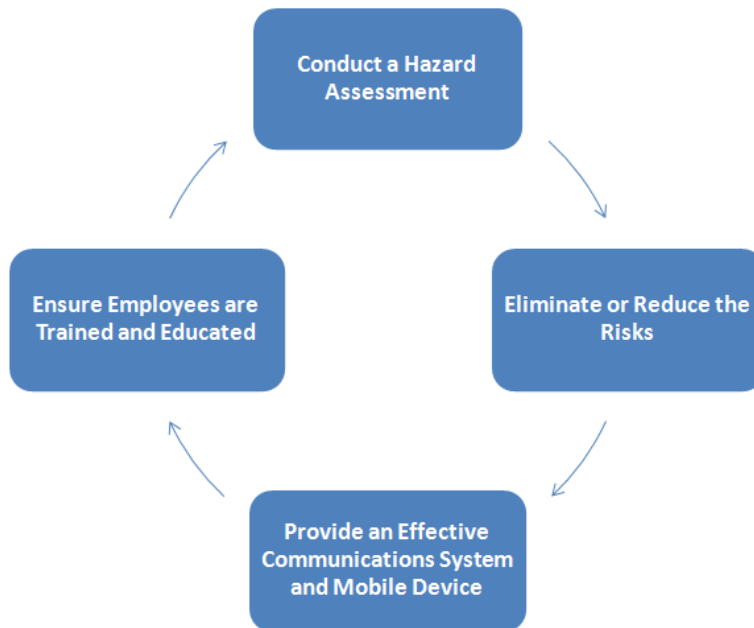
While it is possible to prevent or reduce the exposure of health care workers to workplace hazards, data collected by relevant government agencies is reflecting a worrisome trend in occupational injuries and illness in health care.

“Rates of occupational injury to healthcare workers have risen over the past decade. By contrast, two of the most hazardous industries, agriculture and construction, are safer today than they were a decade ago. [NIOSH]”.

As these tendencies continue, employers in home care are facing an increasing challenge. The negative consequences of a hazardous workplace impacts the delivery of health care services, which includes deterioration in the quality of care provided, as well as higher health care worker turnover rates or career abandonment. These factors contribute to an increased cost for home and community care services. What can we do to create safer workplaces?

Risk Prevention in Home and Community Care

One of the regulations that addresses workplace hazard management in home care is Working Alone presented in Part 28 of the Occupational Health and Safety (OHS) Code [[Working Alone Safely](http://employment.alberta.ca/documents/WHS/WHS-PUB_workingalone.pdf) http://employment.alberta.ca/documents/WHS/WHS-PUB_workingalone.pdf]. According to OHS Code, employers are required to conduct an assessment of the workplace and implement measures that minimize risks associated with employees working alone. The measures include providing employees with an effective way to communicate and request immediate assistance, if there is an emergency or the worker is injured or ill. With the purpose of providing practical guidelines, best practices have been established to assist organizations in health care to make their workplaces a safer place.



A simple checklist can help managers implement best practices for employees working alone with clients away from the employer’s premises. The questions in bold reflect mandatory requirements. Other questions suggest recommended practices that are highly desirable.

EMPLOYEE TRAINING

Do you ensure employees are trained and competent to work alone safely?

- Are employees trained to recognize potentially violent situations?
- Are employees trained in non-violent responses to threatening situations?
- Have employees been instructed to follow the employer’s safe work procedures when meeting clients at their premises?

SAFE WORK PROCEDURE

Do you have a safe work procedure for employees working at their client's premises?

- Does the safe work procedure include an evaluation based on risk awareness and take into consideration the following:
 - Client behavior?
 - Location (unsafe area, isolation, poor lighting, unlit parking, unsafe building)/
 - Presence of dangerous items (weapons, vicious pets)?
 - Others? Specify: _____
- Are employees required to have a safe visit plan for high risk situations based on the above evaluation?
 - Does the safe visit plan consider the following control measures:
 - Use of cell phone to maintain regular contact with the office?
 - Phone designated person prior to and after leaving the client's premises?
 - "Buddy system" – arrange for a second person to accompany the employee in a high risk situation while on the visit?
 - Defer visit until proper safety measures can be met?
 - Others? Specify: _____

COMMUNICATION

Do you have an effective means of communication for employees to contact persons capable of responding when employees need immediate assistance?

- *Does the method of communication* involve one or more of the following:
 - Regular telephone, cell phone, or radio contact with designated person?
 - Check-in points with other employees?
 - Others? Specify: _____

CellTrak - Helping to make the workplace safer

The CellTrak applications provide support to staff and managers in several different ways to implement workplace safety best practices.

- ✓ After the hazard assessment is done, the employee and managers can see the level of risk for each individual scheduled visit in the visit information. This makes critical information highly visible and easily accessible. Based on the risk indicator level and reviewing the type of the risk, the employee and manager can plan necessary measures in a very timely manner. The application is an effective communication tool that places essential information to the hands of the worker in real time and across organization, thus empowering them to take control of risky situations.



- ✓ The application has the capability to display pre-notifications if there is risk for HCWs or clients (e.g. vicious dog or client has a contagious disease, additional protective equipment should be used). Effective communication of potential risk to all team members helps mitigate risk. Healthcare workers and clients are both susceptible to contagious diseases, the treatment of which increases greatly the cost of care provision. A timely warning to wear protective equipment when working with clients with contagious disease not only helps to protect the employee, it also minimizes the risk of spreading the infection to other clients on consecutive visits.



- ✓ The application provides 'real time' alerting in the event the staff does not arrive or leave client's home as scheduled
 - The alerts are configurable by each agency based
 - The alerts enable staff to communicate with each other immediately and check if everything is in order, by text, email or phone

Alerts

Search by Status: All Page 1 of 3

Now viewing records 1 to 50 of 148 Alerts.

Patient Name	Staff Name	Visit Start	Visit Finish	Schedule Start	Schedule Finish	Status	Actions
Forbes, Chelsea	Tilman, Lareina	Dec 12 2010 11:39PM	Dec 13 2010 12:05AM			Long Visit	<input type="button" value="Info"/>
Farrel, Gemma	Lee, Jenny	Dec 14 2010 11:33AM	Dec 14 2010 11:33AM			Short Visit	<input type="button" value="Info"/>
Riggs, Cassidy	Lee, Jenny			Dec 01 2010 1:00PM	Dec 01 2010 1:30PM	Visit Missed	<input type="button" value="Info"/>
Cervantes, Sage	Cohen, Jennifer	Dec 02 2010 4:10PM	Dec 02 2010 4:14PM	Dec 02 2010 2:00PM	Dec 02 2010 2:30PM	Delayed Start Finished Late Less Than Duration	<input type="button" value="Info"/>
Mccormick, Nelle	Cohen, Jennifer	Dec 02 2010 4:14PM	Dec 02 2010 5:18PM	Dec 02 2010 3:00PM	Dec 02 2010 3:30PM	Delayed Start Exceeds Duration Finished Late	<input type="button" value="Info"/>
Olsen, Keegan	Lee, Jenny			Dec 02 2010 4:00PM	Dec 02 2010 4:30PM	Visit Missed	<input type="button" value="Info"/>
Smith, Marshall	Cohen, Jennifer	Dec 02 2010 5:19PM	Dec 02 2010 5:19PM	Dec 02 2010 4:00PM	Dec 02 2010 4:30PM	Delayed Start Finished Late Less Than Duration	<input type="button" value="Info"/>

- ✓ The application provides real-time location based services that include driving directions, which facilitates traveling in unfamiliar areas.



- This enables enhanced communication to staff when responding to emergency events
- The interactive location based services provide the ability for staff to receive updated schedules and client information in real time

Benefits

Reducing the risk and thus reducing the number of adverse events has numerous benefits. Some of them are hard to measure but are proven benefits within the workforce, such as increased feeling of safety (studies show that employees consider the communication device a “life line”), stress reduction, higher workplace satisfaction. Others benefits are directly reflected in cost of providing care:

- ✓ Illness and injury prevention
 - reduced absenteeism from work due to injury and incapacity
 - reduced compensation payouts
 - less early retirement due to injury and incapacity
 - less visits not completed due to worker lost, refused visit due to lack of safety, injured during visit, etc.
- ✓ Higher staff retention
 - lower cost for recruitment, training and incentives
 - increased support through enhanced communication and information
- ✓ Increased feeling of safety
 - higher employee morale > higher quality of care > reduced cost of care providing
- ✓ Having the same HCWs (consequence of reduced turnover) and higher quality of care
 - higher client satisfaction and better health outcomes > higher client retention

Summary

Measures to manage risk do not require highly sophisticated resources but do require good planning and adherence to safe practices. According to the trends, organizations fail in implementing industry best practices at their own peril. As the saying goes “An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure”. Training the employees to use safe work procedures and providing them with effective means of communication is a good investment. It provides long term benefits in reduced cost and increased quality of care.

References:

- National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH)
<http://www.cdc.gov/niosh/topics/healthcare/>
- Occupational Hazard in Homecare
<http://www.cdc.gov/niosh/docs/2010-125/pdfs/2010-125.pdf>
- International Council of Nurses – Violence: A Worldwide epidemic – Fact Sheet
http://www.icn.ch/images/stories/documents/publications/fact_sheets/19k_FS-Violence.pdf
- Working Alone Safely
http://employment.alberta.ca/documents/WHS/WHS-PUB_workingalone.pdf

About CellTrak Technologies, Inc:

Founded in 2006, CellTrak Technologies, Inc. is the leading provider of integrated mobile solutions for the home healthcare, hospice, and private duty markets. Our patented software-as-a-service solutions run on GPS-enabled mobile devices via a homecare technology platform which automates workflow and reduces cost. Data is transmitted wirelessly to an internet site making the data available real time and secure instantaneous integration is provided to the back-end clinical systems and the payer networks. Healthcare professionals have delivered millions of successful visits via CellTrak. For more information please visit: www.celltrak.com

In 2011 CellTrak acquired Cambridge, ON based MedShare a leading provider of mobile clinical solutions. Together CellTrak and MedShare provide the industry leading mobile home health and clinician system for the healthcare industry.

For more information please visit: www.medshare.com or www.celltrak.com

