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Back to Basics:

A Clear Path for Elevating Safety in the Exam Room

Many healthcare professionals would agree that safety is important for quality of both patient care and clinical outcomes. That's why it's no surprise that safety always scores high when healthcare executives and practitioners are surveyed on what's important in their healthcare system.

Unfortunately, many healthcare systems struggle to balance the need to create and maintain a safe, inviting experience for patients and caregivers with other priorities. And while safety is universally seen as important within healthcare, it can often be overlooked when other equally important demands take priority.

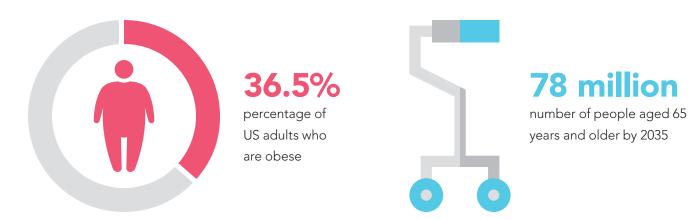# Remembering Why Safety is Important

For patients, routine visits to the doctor can be uncomfortable and filled with anxiety. This can be even more of an issue for persons with mobility issues or concerns about personal safety. For caregivers, experiencing physical, emotional and mental exhaustion may be seen as just being part of the job. The risk for exhaustion can be even worse with the constant concern for safety—assisting patients with mobility issues, straining to reach supplies or even possible cross-contamination and infection from contagions.

Healthcare professionals and patients should expect a better experience where safety is not a constant concern. Patients should be able to focus on their health and the reason for the visit. Providers should be able to spend the day focused on the health and well-being of their patients without sacrificing their own.
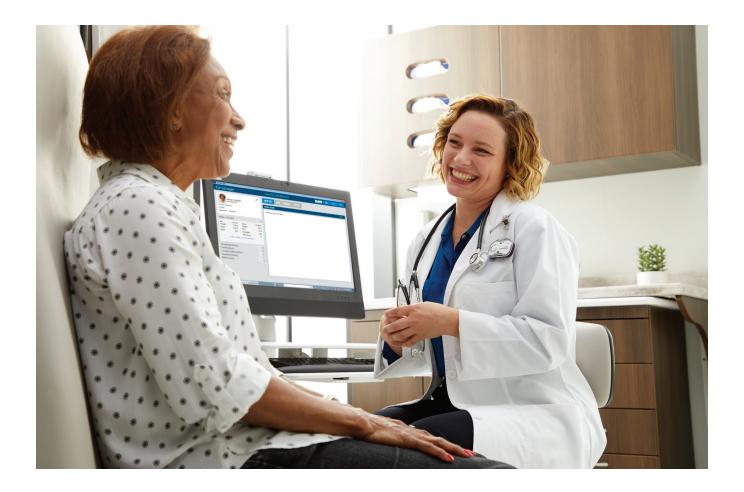
This is why it is important that every effort is made to ensure safety is always a priority. Of course in today's healthcare environment, there are many factors that affect patient and caregiver safety.

- **Shifting patient/caregiver demographics** are changing how exam rooms and equipment are experienced. As the patient population becomes older and heavier, the prevalence of mobility issues increases. Also, by some estimates, over 2/3 of healthcare workers may be women. Having the right equipment and configuration in exam rooms ensures that caregivers and patients of varying size, height, age and mobility capacity can adequately provide or receive quality care without encountering safety issues.

- **Value-based care** is placing more emphasis on outcomes and patient/caregiver experiences. Since the passage of the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act in 2010, value-based payment models have gained traction as consumer, healthcare and government groups work together to identify and track metrics that will improve the quality of care.

Everyone should receive access to quality healthcare, regardless of mobility limitations. Having the right equipment and trained staff can make a huge difference in providing safe, quality care and improving patient outcomes.

36.5%
percentage of US adults who are obese

78 million
number of people aged 65 years and older by 2035

https://www.cdc.gov/obesity/data/adult.html
https://www.cdc.gov/nccdphp/dnpao/index.html

https://www.census.gov/newsroom/press-releases/2018/cb18-41-population-projections.html

- **Liability issues** are becoming a more frequent result of potential unsafe conditions in healthcare environments. While much of the attention has traditionally been placed on human error and malpractice when it comes to liability, unsafe conditions and accidents are gaining prominence. From patient falls and workplace injuries to the increase in healthcare-associated infections, the liability issues associated with making safety a priority are growing.

- **Patient satisfaction and employee retention** have recently taken center stage. With the transition to value-based care, patient satisfaction is now a weighted metric. Also, a tight labor market and shortage of healthcare professionals means that it is even more difficult to attract and retain staff. Many patients and employees would prefer to visit or work in an environment where they feel safe, especially if they have experienced a safety issue.

- **New technology** is making it easier to create seamless experiences and reduce safety issues at the point of care. There are exam chairs that lower to accommodate patients with mobility issues, equipment designed with ergonomic principles to eliminate unnecessary straining, and technology that can help track exposure to contagions.

Five Steps to Keeping Safety a Priority

This five-step approach can help healthcare professionals keep patient and caregiver safety top-of-mind as priorities shift and demands change.

1. **Balance experience with efficiency**
    Adopt an evidence-based approach that provides a framework for placing equal emphasis on the experience (e.g., inviting environments, pleasing aesthetics, safety and comfort) and increased efficiency (e.g., minimal wait times, high room utilization and enhanced workflow).

    This approach keeps patient and caregiver needs at the forefront while still taking into consideration and implementing efficiency gains. For instance, deciding to use a specific exam chair because it is comfortable and offers safety features can be a good step. However, ensuring that the functionality of the chair meets the needs of the space and will not negatively impact efficiency is also important.

2. **Identify the right room configurations**
    Making sure all the equipment adequately fits into the room can be a challenge, but on its own, that may not be enough. The layout and configuration of the room and the equipment it contains can significantly impact the effectiveness and safety of any clinical space. Everything from the size of the room to the location of the exam chair can be important.

    It is especially important to consider how the rooms will be used by caregivers and patients. For instance, decluttered environments with equipment and supplies stored out of sight until needed helps prevent tripping hazards. Consideration given to ergonomics and mobility issues ensures equipment placement and adequate room space allows wheelchair turnaround, eliminating awkward positions that can cause aches and pains.

3. Choose the right equipment

Having the right equipment in the clinical environment can help eliminate safety issues for patients and caregivers. In many cases, the right equipment can enhance both efficiency and the experience. For instance, consider the exam chair. The ideal exam chair for a balanced approach is one that offers the functionality of a clinical device while offering various comfort design elements of a chair.

With the average age of patients on the rise, it is more likely that patients will increasingly need assistance in accessing exam chairs. Exam chairs with a seat height of 15.5" can allow many patients to transfer onto and off of the chair with little or no assistance from caregivers. These adjustable-height exam chairs reduce the risk of distress and injury to patients, including those who are elderly, disabled, obese or pregnant, who may have difficulty accessing fixed exam tables. They also help reduce the risk of caregiver injury caused by assisting or lifting patients onto and off of the chair.

4. Invest in technology

There is technology available on the market today that is designed to help identify and reduce safety issues and hazards in clinical environments.

For instance, real-time locating system (RTLS) technology, which has been providing value in acute care for decades, has more recently helped healthcare organizations improve the experience in ambulatory care facilities.

RTLS makes capturing accurate workflow data possible, communicating in-the-moment patient and staff locations, wait times and staff interactions, as well as providing a vast amount of retrospective detail. This technology also can be used to identify who and which equipment may have been exposed to an otherwise-identified contagion and for how long.

RTLS technology can further reduce safety issues and hazards in the clinical environment with nurse call automation and hand hygiene monitoring. Nurse call automation allows the provider to request help and give their exact location at the push of a button so assistance can be sent quickly. Health systems can also combat hospital-acquired infections by measuring and documenting hand hygiene compliance with RTLS.

5. Offer appropriate training

Access to appropriate and ongoing training is a large part of creating a safe environment for patients and caregivers. This includes general safety training, as well as training on how to interact with and assist patients with mobility issues. Training staff on the proper way to use the equipment and technology in the room is important, especially if the equipment and technology can reduce safety issues when used properly. Having an adjustable exam chair in the room is great, but it doesn't help if caregivers are not properly trained on how to use it. Be sure to work with your equipment manufacturer for training tools and available resources.

Today's clinical spaces must be designed to support healthcare organizations in meeting the demand for high quality care while improving the patient-caregiver experience. While balancing safety with other priorities can be challenging, there are a number of basic steps practitioners and healthcare organizations can take to keep safety at the forefront as they focus on quality care and better outcomes.

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