

When Healthcare Providers Make Hiring Mistakes, Patients Suffer

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When people are admitted to a healthcare facility, they come seeking help and relief. But for some, their ordeal is unnecessarily compounded by the misbehavior of healthcare staff. These misbehaviors can cause much human suffering and significant financial loss, and could be prevented by more careful hiring. Before turning to solutions, let's examine the nature and extent of the problems.

Physical Abuse Problems. In Kentucky, fifteen employees from a care center for the mentally retarded were arrested in 2006 for patient abuse. Poor personnel selection was certainly a contributing factor. "It's true that because of low pay, (such) facilities are often not selective," said Linda Hickson, a professor of health and behavior studies at Columbia University. "They often get people who have no background at all to deal with people with challenging behaviors."

An Associated Press article¹ on the arrests reported state regulators found evidence that patients were kicked, punched, pushed into walls or hurled to the floor. One patient left unsupervised during a bath drowned; another choked to death on a hot dog. No charges were filed in the two deaths. The center had been fined \$1.4 million to date for safety and other violations.

Substance Abuse Problems. In addition to patient abuse, healthcare employers need to be concerned about drug abuse. Dr. Roger S. Cicala, an Associate Professor of Anesthesiology at the University of Tennessee College of Medicine, found even the most conservative estimates are that 8% to 12% of physicians will develop a substance abuse problem during their careers.² And according to an article by Registered Pharmacist Yvette C. Terrie, the figures for pharmacists are even higher. She found that 11% to 15% of pharmacists, at some time in their career, are confronted with alcohol and/or drug dependency problems.³

Nor are nurses immune to such problems. A study by Trinkoff and Storr found that 32% of nearly 4,500 nurses, when anonymously surveyed, indicated substance abuse.⁴ Of even greater concern, they found emergency room nurses were 3.5 times as likely to abuse substances as general practice or pediatric nurses. The last thing an accident victim wants or needs is a drug impaired nurse treating his or her injuries.

Sharon Rossi, RNC, MS, in a presentation entitled "Substance Abuse Among Nurses — It's Everybody's Problem" shared the story of a 28-year-old nurse who was found dead in a locked hospital restroom stall with several vials of drugs shortly after her shift ended in April 2002. Rossi said it is cases like this one that make it imperative that administrators, managers and fellow nurses increase their knowledge about the problems that substance abuse in health care can cause, and how to identify common signs seen in nurses who abuse drugs and/or alcohol.⁵

Theft Problems. It is not only the illegal use of drugs, but the sale of stolen drugs that poses a problem. In his book, *Practical Drug Enforcement*, author Michael Lyman⁶ writes that illegal sales by medical practitioners accounts for the largest current volume

of diverted drugs. He further reports that according to the DEA, theft of pharmaceuticals accounts for nearly 300 million in illegal doses reaching the streets per year.

Pharmaceuticals are not the only target of healthcare theft. In an article by sociology professors Brian Payne and Randy Gainey at Old Dominion University⁷ there are an estimated 2 million thefts from patients by nursing home staff in the US annually. Some of these incidents involved the financial abuse of patients. Elderly patients, many of whom have some degree of hearing and vision loss, are particularly vulnerable to the theft of their money and personal belongings.

Nurses, pharmacists and other medical professionals are in short supply in today's labor market. Recruiting enough qualified staff can be a real challenge for the HR department of healthcare facilities. But patients can be harmed more by dishonest, violent and/or substance impaired employees than by low staffing levels. Healthcare providers are subject to law suits and substantial economic loss unless they are more diligent and selective in their hiring process.

Possible Solutions. One possible solution is to conduct criminal background checks on all new hires. In many states, however, arrests are not recorded, only convictions. Searches must be conducted by county, and some county records are in disarray. While these are limiting factors, criminal record checks may be worth the time and expense, particularly for high level staff.

Another widely used procedure is urinalysis. Unfortunately, many healthcare professionals are aware that most recreational drugs (except for marijuana) are water soluble and are excreted within a matter of days. Even the fat soluble component of marijuana (THC) will dissipate over time.

In addition, drug masking and drug adulterating agents are sold openly on the internet. These are two reasons why the capture rate for urinalysis is so much higher when conducted randomly than when conducted pre-hire. Still, institutions who conduct urinalysis do identify some drug users and they also send the message to others that illegal drug use is not tolerated here.

Some organizations have been successful in pre-screening their job applicants with "integrity tests" to weed out those applicants which are most likely to be involved in misbehavior. These tests typically measure an applicant's tendency to steal, engage in violence and abuse drugs.

There are two kinds of such integrity tests, personality measures and behavioral assessments. Each has their strengths and weaknesses. Personality tests examine attitudes, opinions and personal characteristics. Their questions have no obvious connection to theft behavior and personal drug use.

Applicants taking a personality test often have little idea of the test's purpose, and such tests are generally very non-threatening. These tests do a very good job of rank ordering job applicants by the risk they pose to the employer.

In contrast to personality tests, behavioral assessments ask very direct questions about theft and personal drug use. There is little subtlety. Applicants quickly understand what is being asked and why.

It would be easy to conclude that applicants, knowing they are applying for a job, would lie in answering such questions. But that is not the case with professionally developed behavioral assessments. These tests obtain admissions of bad behavior as blunt as the questions themselves.

The reason job applicants are so open in responding to behavioral assessments is explained by a concept psychologists call “cognitive dissonance”, more literally a conflict (dissonance) in thinking (cognition). This concept has to do with how people handle anxiety and guilt.

When people first engage in activities they know are wrong (in conflict with laws and standards of acceptable behavior) they feel anxious and guilty. In order to resolve their anxiety and guilt (dissonance) they can either change their bad behavior, or change their beliefs about what constitutes bad behavior. Over time, those who persist in theft and substance abuse change their thinking and come to accept their activities as normal.

This is the reason thieves are convinced that everyone occasionally steals, and why drug abusers think society as a whole abuses drugs. Because they have rationalized what they are doing and no longer suffer anxiety, they have little hesitancy in disclosing their activities during a behavioral survey. One of the benefits of a behavioral assessment versus a personality test is that the employer knows the exact nature of the risk. Hiring decisions based on behavioral tests are very easy to defend.

Both kinds of integrity tests are useful pre-employment screening methods. As an added benefit, some integrity tests have been shown to reduce workers’ compensation losses among new hires by fifty percent or more when compared to the losses from more tenured workers.⁸ In organizations with high employee turnover and high workers’ comp losses, the savings can be huge. These savings, along with the reduction in employee theft, substance abuse and violence, make integrity tests worthy of consideration.

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