



CERTIFICATION: IT'S IN THE CARDS

Why taking charge now will stack the deck in your favor

Central Service (CS) professionals who haven't yet become certified may want to get the ball rolling sooner rather than later. This is the ardent recommendation of a number of in-the-know CS experts and departmental managers – many of whom stress the role certification plays in patient safety, customer service, professional development, and career advancement.

Certification of CS technicians is a topic being highlighted with growing regularity, not only within IAHCSMM and amongst those who comprise the CS discipline, but also in the big media (television, consumer magazines, etc.); amongst state elected officials; allied healthcare organizations; and The Joint Commission (TJC) surveyors and other accreditation bodies. The bottom line is the broader public is gaining a better understanding of what CS professionals do on the job and how their roles impact patient care, safety and outcomes. As part of that growing knowledge, they're also

becoming wiser to the importance of having the most skilled, knowledgeable and professional personnel in the role of instrument decontamination, sterilization and management – a need that can be met through certification and a commitment to ongoing education.

Like any other specialty, achieving certification is a representation that individuals possess the theoretical knowledge and “science” behind why tasks and processes need to be performed in a particular fashion, reasoned Steven Adams, CRCST, BA, RN, Nurse Manager, Sterile Processing, Greater Baltimore Medical Center. “Obtaining this knowledge and having the ability to apply this knowledge to daily tasks provides a heightened sense of quality and reliability to the jobs performed.” This is especially true, he stressed, since the CS profession has such a direct impact on patient safety. “Our certification efforts all along have been and will continue to be based on improving patient safety.”



IAHCSMM maintains that all patients have the right to receive the highest quality of care during their visits to a healthcare facility. Through certification, CS technicians will be properly educated to assist in the challenge of reducing healthcare-associated infections. Specifically, the Association contends that every patient deserves to have an educated, certified CS technician responsible for reprocessing his or her instruments. This is especially vital given that surgical instruments and equipment evolve at a rapid pace, and CS professionals must have the knowledge, skill sets and training needed to manage those devices and operate the necessary equipment safely, consistently and effectively. The processing of complex and sophisticated instrumentation, such as robotics, endoscopes, joint replacement devices, and related instruments and equipment requires an advanced technical knowledge that can be attained through certification.

ADHERING TO STANDARDS, RAISING THE BAR

IAHCSMM isn't the only organization extolling the virtues of CS technician certification. In fact, Association for the Advancement of Medical Instrumentation (AAMI) standards clearly recommend certification for individuals responsible for sterilization activities and the management of CS processes.

What's more, TJC's Patient Safety Goals require specific knowledge of the processing and monitoring of instrumentation and equipment to comply with rigid quality control policies targeted toward patient injury. As such, surveyors are increasingly asking CS managers about their facility's certification policies. "During their visits, The Joint Commission is referring to AAMI standards, which state that CS technicians should be certified," reminded Lisa Huber, BA, CRCST, FCS, ACE, sterile process-

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ing director for Anderson Hospital in Maryville, IL.

Certification is anything but a "one and done" achievement marked by a certificate. Perhaps the greatest benefit of certification lies in the fact that to maintain that certification status CS technicians must receive ongoing education and attain continuing education credits to demonstrate their continued competency in the role. More than ever, surveyors, lawyers, legislators, hospital executives, and the general public understand that CS professionals play a key role in the reduction of healthcare-associated infections, and they also are acknowledging how certification and continuing education can assist that important patient safety goal.

"CS technicians are an integral part of the team of professionals dedicated to preventing infections and other adverse

outcomes. Certification demonstrates a commitment to patient safety and quality," confirmed Josephine Colacci, JD, IAHCSMM's Director of Government Affairs.

Colacci and her IAHCSMM Advocacy team are working hard to educate state elected officials across the country on CS professionals' critical role in healthcare facilities, and how certification and continuing education play into that mission. With two states already requiring certification of CS technicians and progress being made on the legislative front in a number of other states, it's a matter of time before facilities nationwide are requiring certification of all professionals involved in the sterile processing function. Many facilities, even those not currently operating in states that require CS certification, are already stepping up and requiring it on their own because they recognize its value, are committed to quality and safety, and are working hard to stay ahead of the competition. It's a prudent move, especially now that a more educated public means more patients and their family members may be asking about certification and visiting facilities that can more clearly demonstrate their commitment to safety.

"Most of the CS staff that I have encountered at both the local and national levels have all indicated that they want to be better respected for the job they perform," said Adams. "For those individuals who are in it this profession for something other than providing and improving patient safety, I have to be honest – they are in the wrong profession."

MAINTAINING A STRONG Foothold

Those who continue to hold out on certification until their state legislators or hospital executives require it are indeed doing so at their own peril. As more states board the certification bandwagon and new technicians are required to become



certified in order to hold a position in the CS department, more tenured, non-certified professionals – even those who were “grandfathered” in under state law (meaning that the bill exempts them from having to become certified) – will likely feel the pressure. *[Note: those who are grandfathered in will still be required to complete 10 CEs annually in order to maintain their position in CS.]*

IAHCMM President-Elect David Jagrosse, CRCST, who also serves as CS Manager at Middlesex Hospital in Middletown, CT, admitted that he has reservations about hiring or maintaining staff who don’t value certification and its role in patient safety. “The goal is to have certification requirements in all 50 states, and many facilities already require certification. If you’re not certified, you’re simply not as marketable.”

Huber agreed. Any technician hoping to assume a supervisory or management role in her hospital – or another CS-related position at a higher rung on the career ladder – won’t stand a chance in the absence of certification. “I see this happening in other hospitals, too. If someone is job hunting and candidates have been narrowed down to two – someone who is certified and someone who is not – the one with the certification is likely to land that position,” she said.

Experts agree that the best step toward advancing the profession and elevating the respect and knowledge of everyone who comprises it is to become more actively involved in the certification process. Jagrosse likened the plight to the American Revolution, where founding father Thomas Paine stated that “those who expect to reap the blessings

of freedom must undergo the fatigue of supporting it.”

Nothing has ever been handed to CS professionals, Jagrosse acknowledged. “We must fight for our profession and, most importantly, for patient safety, Jagrosse reasoned. For those who say they will wait for certification to be required is the equivalent to saying they do not want to learn or enhance their skills until they are required to do so.”

Adams further stressed that point, noting that we’ll never effectively raise the professional bar in this discipline if we aren’t willing to take steps on our own to advance our knowledge and professionalism, and ensure that our skills are aligned with standards, recommendations and best practices.

“CS staff want to be viewed and respected as professionals. Our individual responsibility as professionals is to continually assess our current abilities and knowledge, and seek ways to improve ourselves in these areas,” he said. “If we are truly a professional, then we must hold ourselves and each other accountable to continuously improve. We all need to have individual goals and a plan to address how we intend to meet these goals. If we do not have goals, then we are sitting back waiting for someone else to do the work for us.”

Certification is that first step toward professionalism, he assured.

“There is a saying that hard work pays off in the end. We have to do the hard work first and join the fight for certification. That fight begins with each of us,” 