



Safer Babies Safer Mothers

How One Hospital Made Life Better for Their Precious Patients and Staff.

The maternity department at Vassar Brothers Medical Center made a long-term commitment to patient safety improvement using CRM and the results are anything but small.

When your hospital delivers the most babies between “Manhattan and Montreal,” you have great motivation to ensure that every baby and every mother gets the best possible care.

That’s why in 2006 the leaders at Vassar Brothers Medical Center (VBMC) decided to partner with LifeWings Partners LLC, the industry-leading provider of crew resource management (CRM) based patient safety improvement programs, to uncover and fix potential problem areas in their state-of-the-art maternity center.

Their effort worked. When the hospital implemented the Press Ganey Safety Performer™ solution, an assessment of the hospital’s safety culture based on direct feedback from its staff, their percentile rankings compared to hospitals of all sizes, improved by 9%. Observational feedback from personnel at various levels confirms that staff morale is better, turnover is lower, teamwork dynamics and emergency response are better, and patient satisfaction has improved—all the intended results of a comprehensive improvement plan utilizing proven CRM methods.

Forward-Thinking Leaders Brought Lifesaving CRM to Maternity

Located in the Hudson River Valley since 1887, this renowned affiliate of Health Quest delivers more than 2,500 babies a year. Although the quality of care throughout the hospital was very good, its leaders knew it could be better. After attending a patient safety conference in 2005, key quality leaders invited LifeWings to demonstrate how their CRM training system could help VBMC improve patient and employee satisfaction.

The LifeWings multi-phase, on-site training program was created around the mission of enabling a culture that fosters greater safety for the long-term through the use of proven methodologies adapted from other high-reliability industries.

The leaders at VBMC knew that a quick fix, shallow patient safety program would not work and felt that the LifeWings approach, “creating a fair and just culture”, was exactly what they needed.

To demonstrate the seriousness of their commitment to adopting CRM methods, leaders closed down the OR department for two days—a significant investment and one not done before—and trained more than 247 nurses, physicians, and staff.

After the initial project, six other departments participated in the LifeWings CRM training. The use of CRM methods has made such a difference at VBMC that in 2010, the hospital created a position dedicated solely to improving safety. Paul Corish, the Director of Patient Safety and CRM services and a graduate of the LifeWings Train-the-Trainer program, affirms that “VBMC is on the forefront of CRM compared to our peers. We see daily how the teamwork principles are a part of who we are here; we

say they’re in our ‘DNA’ and the maternity center is an excellent example of the potential results.”

CRM in Maternity: An Unwavering Commitment Helped VBMC Go from Good to Great

The maternity department staff began implementing the LifeWings program in 2006—training more than 100 team members. The department implemented another formal session with LifeWings in 2009 and continually offers in-house simulation and new-hire training. Everyone in the department has received teamwork, communication, safety tool, and debriefing training.

CRM in Action: Lives Saved by a Coordinated Emergency Response Team

The VBMC Chairman of the Obstetrics and Gynecology Department feels that the center had a very good culture of safety but the consistent application of the methods taught in the LifeWings program helped raise the level to “excellent.”

The chairman, who has been with VBMC for 18 years, has seen the improvements first-hand and he cited an example of how this training saves lives with an incident that occurred in October 2010. A patient in her 32nd

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*VBMC Chairman
Division of OB/Gyn*

week of pregnancy presented with a very rare, potentially life-threatening condition in which there is bleeding into, and ballooning of, the major artery that carries blood out of the heart (called a dissecting aortic aneurysm). This critical condition necessitated open-heart surgery while the patient was undergoing a cesarean section to save the baby. He describes the outcome as amazing “choreography” among three surgical teams that had never worked together before, “The cardiothoracic surgeon, anesthesiologist, and I huddled before the surgery. We shared what our teams needed for the best outcome for the patient.” He observed that this pre-procedure brief, a key component of the LifeWings training, helped the teams implement a critical change to the procedure, doing the prep for the heart surgery while the patient was still

awake, that provided the safest possible environment for the baby. He stated, “While I was delivering the baby, the cardiothoracic surgeon was saving the mother. Twenty people, most, if not all of whom, had attended some form of the team training, were able to come together for the first time in a highly stressful and life threatening situation and perform seamlessly.” He indicated that the LifeWings training has added a feeling of security in the operating room since more individuals are looking out for potential mistakes.

The results of an improved culture of safety—higher patient satisfaction and better teams—are seen daily. Susan Amos, the Director of Maternal-Child Health, cites debriefing as one component of CRM that has had a significant impact on the quality of care. A debrief is a formal process that occurs after an event; staff members share challenges, concerns, and questions. Prior to 2011 debriefs had been done informally. This year, the center started implementing a formal debrief after every procedure. The information is recorded, accumulated, and analyzed. As a result of the feedback received, the center has been able to make changes that will make procedures safer for patients and more efficient for staff. For example, staff feedback



highlighted several problems with insufficient tools and supplies on carts. Armed with the trend data, management was able to fix the problem by fixing processes within the department so the problems do not reoccur. Prior to performing debriefs there was no formal mechanism for staff to report deficiencies that could contribute to sub par performance and patient-harming errors. “The staff may have discussed issues among themselves, but management would never know about them,” Ms. Amos shared. The VBMC Vice President of the medical staff, and Chairman of the clinical improvement committee agrees that the adoption of debriefs after every delivery will definitely impact patient safety for the long term. He feels that “the fact that the nurses and physicians are

communicating about the event—even when there are no issues—will help ensure continuous improvement.”

Effective use of CRM methods can create a culture where team members thrive even in dire situations. The debrief procedure is especially important after traumatic events because it provides the caregivers the opportunity to work through the experience and come to terms with the outcome. Healing team members after a traumatic event is critical to maintaining a high quality of care.

Physician Buy-In Makes It Successful Every Day

The physician leader of VBMC’s perinatal risk reduction committee, a board certified attending physician from the Mt. Kisco Medical Group, sees the positive

effects of the team training consistently. “Our skills are better” she stated, “the simulations and removal of hierarchies has enabled us all to focus on the service we are providing. Not having to worry about being reprimanded for speaking up about a potential issue has put all of us on the same page.”

She sees further progress to be made through the continued use of debriefings. She believes that debriefing will expose team character as well as system flaws so that more improvements can be made. She also stated that the debriefings would help the department when there are changes in the physical layout of the department or new staff hires.

Simulation Exercises Paired with CRM Methods Enable Continued Improvement

In conjunction with the LifeWings training, the center started implementing formal simulation training in 2008. Using a high-fidelity mannequin, staff members experience at least four OB emergency exercises a year. During the simulations, nurses and staff practice communication techniques learned in the CRM training. Starting in 2013 physician attendance at a simulation event will be mandatory for renewing credentials; an

addition that Susan Amos, who started the simulation program, feels will make the training even more valuable.

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Physician leader of VBMC’s perinatal risk reduction committee

The Future of CRM in Maternity and Beyond

After seeing the continued success of the maternity department, and the improvement in the staff’s overall perception of the culture of safety, the hospital’s commitment to formal teamwork training, in addition to their other patient safety improvement efforts, has taken on even greater urgency. By 2012, all new employees, hospital-wide, will take CRM classes. As Dr. Daniel Aronzon, the President and CEO of VBMC stated, creating a “fair and just culture,” where people feel comfortable exposing

risks and potential errors, means creating “an environment in which everyone feels that they are respected in every interaction.” Having no fear of retribution fosters confidence to speak up and stop potential errors.

Partners with a Purpose

LifeWings, located in Collierville, TN, was founded in 2005 with the sole mission of helping health care providers improve safety with the proven methodologies used successfully in high reliability industries.

Their leaders, experts in health care and aviation, were the pioneers in effectively adapting tools proven in the aviation world to the health care setting. Their program succeeds where others have failed because they require their clients to measure results and have a plan for sustaining improvements. As a result of industry-wide recognition of the LifeWings program, their team has helped providers nationwide improve service delivery, patient survey scores, and employee satisfaction. Providers that employ the methods in the LifeWings programs also reduce exposure to malpractice and loss of reimbursement due to errors.



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