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Economic Downturn Is Impacting Medication Safety

ISMP Survey Shows United States Hospitals, Patients Affected

Horsham, Pa.— A recent survey from the Institute for Safe Medication Practices (ISMP) shows that the current U.S. recession may be compromising medication safety, at least according to hospital workers. According to an ISMP survey of healthcare professionals conducted in the fall of 2009, the economy is taking a toll in a number of hospitals and forcing them to take steps in response to the economic downturn that put patients at greater risk.

The 848 respondents to ISMP's survey were predominantly nurses and pharmacists working at a staff or managerial/director level in hospitals. Nearly a quarter (20%) of respondents reported a *large* negative impact on medication safety in their hospitals due to the economy; another 21% reported a *moderate* negative impact. Similar results were found regarding the impact on patient safety in general.

About 20% of respondents reported that medication errors have occurred in the past year in which changes due the economic downturn were believed to be a contributing factor. However, only 27% of respondents reported that leaders in their organization have developed a plan to minimize possible effects on patient safety during the economic downturn.

General Patient Safety Findings

- ***Staff Reductions***—Respondents reported staff cuts have had the largest negative impact. More than two-thirds reported that the economy has affected their staffing. About the same percent reported that the economy was causing low morale, often citing unsafe workloads and inability to provide quality and safe care as the key contributing factors.

- **Working Conditions/Technology**--About half of the survey respondents felt the economy has negatively impacted equipment purchase, technology implementation and updating, and facility remodeling. About half also reported that the economy is affecting their ability to participate in education and certification programs.
- **Culture of Safety**--According to respondents, organizational culture, staff willingness to report errors, and leadership support for safety have been the least impacted by the economy. Still, a third reported the economy has negatively affected the safety culture--no time to report near misses was the most common example given.

Medication Safety Findings

- **Medication Safety Officer Cutbacks**--About 42% of respondents reported that the economy has forced a reduction in dedicated time or total elimination of the position of a medication safety officer (MSO) or quality/risk staff dedicated to medication safety.
- **Drug Purchasing Affected**--About a third of respondents reported that current economic conditions have resulted in less safe drug purchasing decisions, such as switching to multiple-dose vials instead of using single-use vials and prefilled syringes. A third also reported reduced availability of medications as organizations try to maintain smaller inventories.
- **Reduction in Pharmacist Involvement**--More than a third of respondents told us the economy had impacted the clinical presence of pharmacists on patient care units.
- **Missed Safety Steps**--About 33% of respondents reported a reduction in available staff for patient education, and 31% reported that staffing changes had led to missed independent double-checks of high-alert medications before dispensing or administration.
- **Drug Administration Shortcuts**--About a quarter of nurse respondents reported that staff reductions due to the faltering economy has led to hurried drug administration practices during which shortcuts are sometimes taken.

For a more complete analysis of results from ISMP's survey on the economy's impact on medication safety, go to <http://www.ismp.org/Newsletters/acutecare/articles/20100114.asp>.

About ISMP: The Institute for Safe Medication Practices (ISMP) is an independent, nonprofit organization that works closely with healthcare practitioners and institutions, regulatory agencies, consumers, and professional organizations to provide education about medication errors and their prevention. ISMP represents more than 35 years of experience in helping healthcare practitioners keep patients safe, and continues to lead efforts to improve the medication use process. For more information on ISMP, or its medication safety alert newsletters and other tools for healthcare professionals and consumers, visit www.ismp.org.