Methods for Injury Prevention While Performing High-Risk Tasks in the Operating Room

Within the operating room environment, there are several high-risk tasks that push the limits of human capabilities. Patient care risk factors that can potentially lead to caregiver injuries include but are not limited to:

- Heavy Loads
- Sustained Awkward Positions
- Bending and Twisting
- Reaching
- Fatigue or Stress
- Force
- Standing for Long Periods of Time

The first line of defense in risk management is known as “Engineering Controls”. Engineering controls can be defined as equipment, devices or instruments that remove or isolate a hazard. Technological advances over the past several years have addressed patient care ergonomics primarily in the area of horizontal and vertical patient transfers. This is applicable in the operating room environment through the use of lateral transfer and friction reducing devices when transferring patients on and off operating room tables/beds.

However, there are still several tasks in the operating room that are potentially physically taxing where technological solutions are not yet available. In these instances, the preferred risk management vehicle that should be utilized is known as “Work Practice Controls”. Work practice controls can be defined as modifications in technique that reduce or eliminate the likelihood of exposure by altering the manner in which a task is performed. Examples of work practice controls that can be utilized in the operating room environment include adjusting the height of the table to reduce awkward posture, reducing employee exposure time through job rotation and/or frequent rest breaks, requiring two or more staff members for performing high risk tasks, etc.

Examples of high-risk tasks in the operating room environment where technological solutions are not yet available that should consider work practice controls include but are not limited to:

- Lifting and Holding Patients Extremities
- Holding Retractors For Long Periods of Time
- Reaching, Lifting, Moving or Holding Equipment
- Repositioning patients on operating room beds

A successful injury prevention program in the medical/surgical environment will encompass both engineering and work practice controls to minimize the risk of caregiver injury. Please contact your United Heartland Risk Management Consultant for assistance with implementing these injury prevention strategies within your facility.