Sterile Processing

Knowledge, Skills, Competencies

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Every sterile processing department (SPD) strives to assign responsibilities to well-prepared employees who can demonstrate competence in the entire scope of sterile processing: decontamination, assembly, inspection, packaging, sterilization, monitoring, and storage of sterile items. Only employees with a commitment to a high level of performance can promote patient safety.

Processing instruments and equipment is an integral part of the facility’s mission to provide safe patient care. In both inpatient and outpatient facilities, SPDs ensure that instruments and equipment used for patients will not cause injury or infection. Each individual, and every process performed in the SPD, has an impact on patient safety. SPD employees, together with clinicians who use the instruments, are partners. Safe patient care requires good communication and coordination. Our patients are everybody’s business.

Competent employees make informed decisions because they know why a practice is safe and effective. They go to appropriate sources for answers and don’t rely solely on information from colleagues. In addition to mastering competencies, outstanding personnel in the SPD have integrity and demonstrate accountability. Adults pursue learning for professional growth and development. A personal commitment to excellence is also essential for ensuring that we do not place our patients at risk for injury or infection.

Sterile processing competencies are relevant regardless of the venue in which you work (e.g., separate department in an acute care facility, the sterile processing area within the operating room (OR) suite, or ambulatory surgery center). Although equipment may differ from site to site, principles and best practices remain the same. Each facility should use the manufacturer’s instructions for use (IFU) to create a competency checklist for each specialized item or piece of equipment for which employees will be responsible.

This manual assumes that you have been oriented to your position in the SPD and have mastered the basic skills required for your position. Contained here are evidence-based concepts that will help you achieve excellence in the SPD. Included are competency documents for each phase of sterile processing. Each facility should augment these basic competencies with competency documents crafted from the IFU for each specialized item and piece of equipment.
Module I
Terminology and Principles

This module will introduce you to terminology and principles (i.e., the knowledge base or evidence) that you will need to understand the tasks you are expected to perform and to make informed decisions about your practice every day.

Doing things merely because you were taught to do them in a certain way, or because “we’ve always done them that way,” doesn’t protect you from making the same mistakes that those who taught you have been making. Protecting patients requires that you do what you know is right because you understand why it is right.

Competency also includes your attitude toward work, learning, and the way you go about doing your job. In addition to mastering the skills required to process instruments effectively, exceptional employees are conscientious about details; they can explain the reasons for what they do; they assume responsibility for continually increasing their knowledge; they maintain a well-organized workplace; they use time and materials wisely; and they are good role models for other employees. After you have mastered the basic practice competencies associated with your job, look for opportunities to expand your knowledge and skills. Build relationships with end users to broaden your perspective and understanding of your role in patient care. Remember that good things happen to folks who are well-prepared when opportunities come along.