

Making a Commitment to Safe Care: My AAAASF Certification Experience

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Obtaining certification has been one of the best investments I have made. Safety and compliance initiatives for the benefit of better quality of care and a safer environment for the patients is a mission statement that everyone can get behind. It transcends employee/employer boundaries, it unifies doctors and staff, and it clarifies the goals and objectives of the organization. I have been a pediatric dentist for over twenty years, having gone through Board Certification and Recertification. I went into private practice upon graduation and four years later, following my appointment as a Pediatric Dental Section Program Director, I founded a Pediatric Dental Residency Program at a major New York academic medical center. After a ten-year run as program director, I returned to private practice, where for the past 24 years, I have operated my own practices and have purchased a number of existing practices. I now own and operate 18 pediatric dental practices in three states with over 40 pediatric dentists in my employ. I have seen many management styles, personality types and team building initiatives come and go. But, throughout my career, I have found that The American Association for Accreditation of Ambulatory Surgery Facilities (AAAASF) certification has been a significant impetus to positive change in the delivery of patient care and in the operations of my practices.

AAAASF certification is a significant undertaking that requires the commitment and effort of the whole organization. Specifically, it requires that the dental practice step back and objectively review all systems related to patient safety and quality of care. AAAASF provides a roadmap that starts with staff and training, reviews infrastructure and equipment upgrades necessary to meet all modern standards, and ends with random case reviews and reporting of all morbidity and mortality. In short, it is an intensive and comprehensive process to obtain and keep certification, but a dental practice must take steps to ensure the consistent provision of safe and high-quality care to all patients. These efforts and outcomes alone make obtaining certification an important exercise for any dental practice.

Moreover, obtaining AAAASF certification is an excellent team-building experience. It clarifies goals and objectives, separates team leaders and followers and identifies facilitators versus objectors. During the process of obtaining certification, there will be many opportunities for personal growth and staff education. The organization benefits don't end there. Because of the continuous and ongoing reporting requirements of AAAASF, maintaining certifications ensures a continuous process of performance improvement and provides better identification of organizational or individual problems.

Going through the process of obtaining certification will help you identify team players as well as passive and active resistors. Obviously, anyone who doesn't get on board and share your organizational values and goals – or who puts themselves, their egos, or their comfort before the organization's goal of improving quality and safety – is someone you may want to consider undertaking corrective action or discharging from your practice. Often times these passive or active resistors may be holding back your practice in many other areas as well. Anyone who is passively or actively resisting your efforts to make your office safer and provide a higher quality of care is likely resisting your initiatives in many other areas. In light of this, obtaining and keeping AAAASF certification is an essential tool in identifying problematic personnel and practices and instituting prompt corrective actions. Use the opportunity to make changes to your practice that you have been neglecting or avoiding. In effect, certification can be an agent for positive change in your practice.

AAAASF is a continuous and ongoing process that will take your time and effort, but it is well worth your while. I recommend that you schedule yourself and your staff for 8 – 12 weeks to review all the parts of the certification self-survey. Do a walkthrough with key personnel, identify projects, and delegate tasks. Schedule regular weekly meetings to review progress and keep on track with timelines. Because the ultimate goal of certification is so important, consider planning a reward dinner for the staff to celebrate their efforts and commitment to safety and quality.

AAAASF will be there every step of the way, operating not only as an inspector of your practice, but also as a facilitator who is committed to helping you achieve and maintain certification. In your daily life and everyday practice of dentistry, it is hard to keep all the balls in the air. AAAASF helps you with quarterly reminders for reporting, updates on national standards, and notification of public health notices, etc. I encourage anyone who does sedation in their offices to strongly consider engaging AAAASF to help you in your journey. To the extent that more and more dental practices will become certified, I believe it will greatly benefit our profession and our patients. I therefore strongly recommend that you consider pursuing AAAASF Certification in your practice.

