

# Paul O'Neill addresses Maryland Healthcare Leaders

Maryland Patient Safety Center Releases  
"Engaging Boards in Patient Safety"

October 2009

Paul O'Neill, former Treasury Secretary and Alcoa Chief Executive Officer (CEO), shared key leadership principles for safety during an October 19 leadership breakfast held by the Maryland Patient Safety Center (MPSC) and the Maryland Healthcare Education Institute (MHEI). Speaking to a room of approximately 60 healthcare leaders, including CEOs, medical leaders, and hospital board members, O'Neill focused on three main principles that lay the foundation for improving employee wellness and satisfaction, enhancing safety and quality for patients, and strengthening profit and value to companies.

It is leadership's responsibility to ensure that every employee can honestly respond affirmatively the three key statements, said O'Neill.

1. I am treated with dignity and respect, without regard to gender, race, position, educational background, or any other discriminatory variable, by everybody, everyday
2. I am given everything I need – training, education, tools, time, etc – so I can make a contribution that gives meaning to my life
3. Someone I care about notices I did it (recognition)

When these principles are truly imbedded in a culture, according to O'Neill, staff will help make sure that the organization is better positioned to meet its goals. Leaders can guard against latent cynicism or disbelief by actively and consistently demonstrating and reinforcing these principles. "It is about everything we do, not just when it is convenient," said O'Neill.

O'Neill emphasized that these principles can be successfully applied to our complex healthcare system.



Staff at all skill levels are the greatest assets of hospitals and providers. Thus, leaders who adopt these strategies and expectations help align the organization's focus on staff well-being. There are opportunities to create greater value for employees and organizations by reducing redundancies and waste in healthcare, while simultaneously creating opportunities to improve quality and patient safety, he said. Freeing valuable staff time – nurses, physicians, and analysts – to help resolve quality and safety problems should be a primary goal.

Inefficiencies related to medical records was a healthcare example cited by O'Neill. To address the constant struggle to follow-up on errors and omissions in the records by physicians and staff, O'Neill advocated demonstrating the time and financial implications of these errors and omissions to physicians; this should be followed by engaging staff in a process to reduce these errors. By freeing staff time and budget, and advocating that staff respect each other and the need to ensure accuracy, the hospital team can work on other critical process and quality issues. He challenged leaders to better use employee skills as the goal in this type of effort, rather than cost savings or reductions in necessary staff. "It is not about saving money, it is about doing the right thing," said O'Neill.

Transparent, "just-in-time" information is also essential, according to O'Neill. He believes timely data is critical for organizations to quickly mobilize across departments and units, as well as to swiftly correct errors and processes. By shielding information for fear of litigation and discovery, O'Neill cautioned, the organization risks being blind to issues it needs to address, and failing to be responsive to staff and customer concerns.

A new report on the role of trustees in patient safety was also released at the MPSC leadership breakfast. "Engaging Boards in Patient Safety: A Working Paper for Hospitals from the Maryland Patient Safety Center & Maryland Healthcare Education Institute" underscores the critical role in patient safety played by boards of trustees and healthcare executives. The working paper synthesizes presentations and discussions at a recent roundtable sponsored by MPSC and MHEI, which was attended by Presidents/CEOs and Board members from nine Maryland hospitals and health systems. It also contains 10 practical, "actionable" strategies for engaging hospital Boards in patient safety and seven questions healthcare Board members shouldn't hesitate to ask the executive team.

O'Neill's presentation at the Maryland Patient Safety Center breakfast followed his keynote address the previous evening at the 34th Annual Medical Staff and Governance Leadership Conference, hosted by MHEI.