



# EC Tracer Scenario

## Environmental factors in preventing patient falls

During the first two quarters of 2016, 52 sentinel events were reported to The Joint Commission that involved patient falls resulting in injury. The incidence of patient falls resulting in injury was also high during previous years.<sup>1</sup>

Earlier in 2016, The Joint Commission's Center for Transforming Healthcare launched its Targeted Solutions

Tool® (TST®) for patient falls. The TST provides proven strategies for reducing patient safety event in health care organizations. Visit [http://www.centerfortransforminghealthcare.org/tst\\_pfi.aspx](http://www.centerfortransforminghealthcare.org/tst_pfi.aspx) for more information.<sup>2</sup>

The best way to identify environmental fall risk factors in an organization is to conduct an environmental assessment. Areas to examine within this assessment

include the following:

- Lighting in patient areas and hallways
- Degree of clutter and obstructions in patient walkways
- Stability of handrails
- Sturdiness of furniture
- Security of locks and window openings
- Safety of equipment such as assistive devices, alarms, call bells, beds, and so forth
- Hazards in the outside terrain

### Sample Tracer Questions

The bracketed numbers before each question correlate to questions, observations, and data review described in the sample tracer. The information gained by conducting a mock tracer can help to highlight a good practice and/or determine issues that may require further follow-up.

#### Direct Care Staff

- [1] What is the process for assessing a patient for fall risk?
- [2] What do you do when the process shows that a patient is at risk for falling?
- [3] What environmental controls does the organization have in place to prevent falls?
- [4] What technology (such as assistive devices) does the organization use to prevent falls?
- [5] What do you do if that technology fails?
- [6] How do you respond if a patient falls?
- [7] How is the fall reported?
- [8] What do you do to prevent falls in the future?
- [9] What orientation and training have you received regarding fall prevention?
- [10] Are you aware of how to prevent yourself from falling?
- [11] What do you do when you see an environmental risk for falls, such as a spill?

#### Unit Manager

- [12] What is the department's orientation and training for falls?
- [13] How often is that training provided?
- [14] What do you as a manager do to prevent patient and employee falls?

#### Transport and Diagnostic Testing Staff

- [15] How are you informed that a patient is at risk for falls?
- [16] What is the process for preventing a fall during transport?
- [17] How do you respond when a patient falls?
- [18] What orientation and training do you receive regarding fall prevention?

#### Safety Officer

- [19] Does the organization examine environmental risks regarding falls during environmental tours?
- [20] What do you do when you discover an environmental risk?
- [21] Has the organization done a root cause analysis on environmental risks for falls?

### Scenario

A surveyor is visiting a patient care unit, tracing the care of an elderly patient who is at risk for falling. During the course of the tracer, the surveyor asks to see the unit's data on patient falls. Upon reviewing the data, he notices that the unit has a higher-than-expected fall rate. This prompts the surveyor to examine further the issue. (Bracketed numbers correlate to "Sample Tracer Questions," left.)

#### At the patient care unit

The surveyor begins his exploration by speaking with the nurse who is working with the elderly patient. The surveyor asks the nurse about the processes for assessing fall risk, the procedures to respond to a patient who has been determined to be at risk for falls, and the interventions used to prevent falls. [1–2]

"What environmental controls does this unit have to prevent falls?" the surveyor asks. "Well, the floors have a nonskid surface on them, and we have handrails positioned throughout the unit," the nurse responds. "In addition, we are pretty scrupulous about lighting. It's important that the hallways, bathrooms, patient rooms, and so on are well lit, so patients can see where they're going. Our maintenance department is really good about keeping all the light-bulbs fresh." [3]

The surveyor chats with the nurse about how she uses technology—such as assistive devices and wheelchair alarms—to prevent falls. [4–5]

After talking with the nurse, the surveyor stands aside and watches her work with the elderly patient. He notes how the nurse uses preventive and assistive technology, communicates with other providers about the patient's fall risk, and responds to a spill on the floor that could present a slipping hazard.

The surveyor then takes a closer look at the unit itself. He notices some loose floor tiles that could present a tripping hazard. He also observes that part of the floor surface is somewhat slick and that the shoes that staff members are wearing may put them at risk for falls.

After observing the staff member and the unit, the surveyor approaches another nurse and asks him what he would do if a patient fell, including how he would respond to the patient, how he would report the issue, and what the next steps would be to prevent this type of incident from happening again. [6–8] The surveyor also speaks with the nurse about any training and education he has received regarding fall prevention, including how to assess for falls, use interventions to prevent falls, and respond to falls. [9]

“How much training have you had about fall prevention?” asks the surveyor. The nurse responds, “We just did an in-service a couple months ago, and the supervisor is always posting information sheets around the unit about being aware of patient fall risk. We are supposed to get some new equipment in the next few months. I am sure we'll get some training when that arrives.”

Finally, the surveyor asks the nurse if he is aware of his own risk for falling and whether he knows how to prevent falls for himself. [10–11]

The surveyor then spends some time talking with the manager of the unit. He asks about the training offered for staff, how often that training is provided,

and what processes are in place for fall prevention and response. [12–14] The surveyor's goal here is to make sure that the staff members' responses mirror the manager's responses.

### Meeting with transport staff

After speaking with the manager, the surveyor asks to talk with a transport staff member. He is introduced to a young man who has been transporting patients in the organization for six months. The surveyor asks how the staff member prevents falls during patient transport. Just as with direct care staff, the surveyor asks about responding to a patient fall, documenting a patient fall, and training and education. [15–18] During this conversation, the transport staff member mentions that he saw a patient fall recently in the diagnostic testing area. The surveyor asks him to describe the incident and then asks the staff member to take him to the area where the fall occurred.

**TIP:** Although this tracer stemmed from reviewing data about a particular unit's fall rate, organizations can also identify areas at risk for employee and visitor falls by looking at employee health records, minutes of the environment of care (EC) safety committee, and US Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) reporting documentation. After an area of risk is identified, an organization can use a tracer to help explore compliance issues in that area.

### Diagnostic testing area


In the diagnostic testing area, the surveyor observes the area for a few minutes, watching to see how transport staff communicate with diagnostic testing area personnel about patients identified as being at risk of falling, the use of environmental controls for fall risk, and the use of assistive devices. The surveyor then speaks with diagnostic testing personnel about how they are informed of a patient's risk for falling and what they do with that information. He probes for

information about the processes in place in the area for preventing and responding to patient falls during testing. He also talks with staff members about orientation and training. [15–18] Finally, he observes the unit for any environmental contributors to fall risk.

### Consulting with the safety officer

Before concluding the tracer, the surveyor makes a brief stop at the office of the safety officer. He asks to see the notes from the most recent environmental tours and checks to see if the organization is looking for potential fall risks during these tours. He queries the safety officer about how the organization responds to any identified fall risks—specifically focusing on the fall risks on the unit. [19–21]

### Moving forward

Based on the tracer, the surveyor might follow up with a discussion on these topics: performing a root cause analysis for falls on the unit and within the diagnostic testing area, since although the organization has some good processes in place, its fall rate indicates that it could be doing more to prevent patient falls, and incorporating more environmental controls to help ensure that the environment does not exacerbate fall risks for patients. 

### References

1. Summary Data of Sentinel Events Reviewed by The Joint Commission. Jul 5, 2016. Accessed Aug 11, 2016. [https://www.jointcommission.org/assets/1/18/Summary\\_2Q\\_2016.pdf](https://www.jointcommission.org/assets/1/18/Summary_2Q_2016.pdf).
2. Joint Commission Center for Transforming Healthcare. Targeted Solutions Tool for Preventing Falls. August 11, 2016. [http://www.centerfortransforminghealthcare.org/tst\\_pfi.aspx](http://www.centerfortransforminghealthcare.org/tst_pfi.aspx).