

The meaning of internal responsibility

By Carola Hicks

Please note that this article is not about client safety; it is about your personal safety as an employee working in health care!

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (May 2011) – “Health-care workers face a wide range of hazards on the job, including needle stick injuries, back injuries, latex allergy, violence and stress. Although it is possible to prevent or reduce health-care worker exposure to these hazards, healthcare workers actually are experiencing increasing numbers of occupational injuries and illnesses.”

The basis for the Internal Responsibility System (IRS) is: Anyone can cause an accident, everyone can and should take steps to prevent accidents and exposures, and everyone should be responsible for health and safety in the office.

This article is relevant for those who think they don't have any workplace hazards, that they work safely and have never had an accident.

Simply put, the IRS makes every individual responsible for health and safety, without exception and regardless of the practice size. Every worker who sees a hazard has a duty to report the situation. Every employer has a duty to assess the hazard and eliminate, modify or provide an alternative to the hazard.

Accountability is the basis for the success of the IRS. People interact with each other to identify and solve health and safety problems and seek opportunities to eliminate identified hazardous processes. In your workplace, if *everyone* practises health and safety, then you have a compliant and, most likely, a successful IRS.

There is responsibility associated with each person's job and there is a moral responsibility to do that job safely. The most important element of the IRS is that everyone takes personal responsibility.

In a dental office, the IRS starts with the employer's delegation of responsibility for work, ensuring that health and safety are an integral part. The three aspects of any job – authority, responsibility and accountability – flow down the organization by way of delegation. This way, health and safety become more significant at the clinical level, where most are “at risk.”

The employer's role in health and safety is to establish policy, strategies, training and long-term planning. Health and safety are not separate functions, but must be a natural part of the day-to-day work in any practice.

The human element is by far the most important aspect of health and safety management and the foundation for the IRS. The IRS should allow people to continually improve the process, deal with problems and reduce risk in the workplace. There are enormous variations in workplaces and, to some degree, every practice has an IRS. The proactive way is to assess your current work conditions and then move forward with improvements.