13-Inch Surgical Tool Left In Patient for Months

For about two months after surgery to remove a large malignant tumor, Donald Church complained of severe pain. Initially, he was told that it was normal pain associated with recovery from a major surgery, but an x-ray revealed that a malleable retractor similar in size to a ruler had been left inside his body after surgery. A second surgery was done to remove the tool. Mr. Church is not expected to suffer from long term health consequences and received a $97,000 settlement.

Analysis

1. Problem
   - Problem(s): Tool left in patient after surgery
   - When: June 1, 2000
   - Where: University of Washington Medical Center
   - Task being performed: Removal of a large malignant tumor

2. Impact to the Goals
   - Patient Safety: Significant risk to patient’s health
   - Negative publicity for healthcare facility
   - Settlement awarded to patient

3. Solutions
   - A simple solution to reduce the risk for retained surgical items is to institute a formal procedure for counting surgical supplies and tools before and after surgery. Simple manual counts are a decent first step, but errors still occur, especially in the often hectic and stressful environment in an operating room. Some hospitals use a visual inventory system where tools are brought in a special storage bag with an individual compartment for each item. As items are done being used they are put back into their specific spot. If all compartments are full, everything is accounted for so it’s easy to tell if something is missing. Another solution that is gaining in popularity is use of an electronic tracking system. The most common use of electronic systems is to track sponges, which are by far the most common object left inside patients. Each sponge has an electronic tag and the patient is scanned after surgery to verify that none were left behind. The sponge tracking systems add about $8 to $12 to the cost of each surgery and have dramatically reduced the number of retained sponges when used.

Evidence: Every surgery carries a certain amount of risk.

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Cause Mapping is a Root Cause Analysis method that captures basic cause-and-effect relationships supported with evidence.