

Ensuring Safety and Security in a Home Office

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Among the benefits offered by a prospective employer, the opportunity to work at home ranks high to job candidates. However, the employer's commitment to a home-based or telecommuting employee should continue beyond recruiting and hiring by helping to ensure a safe and secure work environment in the home office. Implementing home office evaluations can be a tool for developing and maintaining a strong bond between the telecommuter and the facility.

This article outlines the initial and annual home office evaluation process developed by Frederick Memorial Healthcare System (FMH) in Frederick, MD, for its home-based medical transcriptionists. The program was developed in anticipation of the OSHA ergonomics standards for providing a safe and healthy work environment and applying them to the transcriptionists' home office.

Telecommuting: Everybody Wins

More healthcare facilities are offering medical transcriptionists the opportunity to work from home. The advantages to the employee are obvious. Transcriptionists are enthusiastic about work schedule flexibility that accommodates a variety of schedules. Some individuals provide adult supervision to school-age children or dependent adults living in the home. Transportation problems are instantly resolved: no more snow emergencies, road construction, or daily dose of road rage. Disagreements about the transcription room thermostat setting cease as well.

In response to a questionnaire distributed to home-based medical transcriptionists in October 1999, one of the most commonly cited advantages to working at home was independence from the often-crowded, usually noisy, interruption-filled environment of transcription departments in healthcare facilities. It was quieter at home, and transcriptionists demonstrated higher productivity.

The employer also finds advantages in developing a home-based transcription department. A more flexible work schedule provides broader coverage for evenings, nights, and weekends, which are traditional staffing problems. Expensive space allocation in the clinical setting is reduced when transcriptionists move to a home office. When telecommuting employees are coupled with a productivity-based compensation plan that pays for reports completed (and not for the non-transcription related activities that historically have been part of the medical record department), a win/win culture emerges.

At FMH, all medical transcription is performed by hospital employees working in home-based offices. As employees, they are entitled to the same benefits as any hospital-based employee and the pay scale is the same. All equipment (excluding furniture and reference library) is supplied and maintained by the hospital, as well as compensation for two telephone lines. Mandatory monthly meetings, training, and occasional interruption in equipment operation or other emergency may require the on-site presence of medical transcriptionists. On these occasions, employees are expected to comply with all standards of on-site employment, including parking regulations, dress code, and wearing an employee ID badge.

Keeping It Safe

How can the employer educate and evaluate potential safety and health hazards in a home office? An initial and annual home visit program was developed at FMH to evaluate health and safety issues. The home office evaluation bridges the gap between hospital and home and demonstrates the hospital's ongoing commitment to its employees, regardless of their location.

FMH's goal was to comply with OSHA's general duty clause: "to provide a safe and healthful workplace." When FMH transcriptionists first moved their offices to their homes five years ago, an industrial rehabilitation therapist performed a home evaluation for ergonomic safety. Recommendations from the therapist were implemented, but there was no follow-up. As a result, the annual home visits program was implemented.

An initial home office visit to evaluate the employee's workplace determines the safety of the work environment. To maintain a safe environment, an annual home visit to reevaluate the home-based employee's work site was initiated. If the evaluator identifies problematic issues, the employee health manager is notified and a home revisit by the industrial rehabilitation therapist is scheduled. Any recommendations are communicated to the transcription manager for implementation.

The initial and annual evaluation process helps ensure that FMH employees working at home are performing their job duties in a safe and healthful way and in an ergonomically efficient environment.

Annual Check-ups

The home office visit is planned to immediately precede the annual evaluation for each employee. The appointed time of visit is arranged during regular work hours. The checklist for the home visit is provided to the employee prior to the visit, so the transcriptionist is aware of the scope and purpose of the visit.

Home visits at FMH are conducted either by the transcription coordinator, a Certified Medical Transcriptionist (CMT) who is a primary quality assurance resource, or the transcription manager. It is important for the employee to understand that the evaluator is not acting as a physical therapist, occupational therapist, or ergonomics expert, and that the home office is being evaluated by an informed transcription practitioner. If there is a question of compliance or concern, a referral is made to the employee health manager.

All computer equipment is furnished to the employee by the hospital. The inventory of hospital equipment is verified from the list prepared by the IS department. It is important that the evaluator observe the log-on process to confirm that the log-in script is functioning appropriately, and that no unauthorized software is loaded on the PC. There should be no local printer connection to the PC.

The evaluator will inspect the cable connections to the PC, modems, and telephone lines, looking for:

- evidence of damage or wear
- appropriate length cables for PC and telephone lines, use of bands for excessively long cables. There should be no "stretch" on lines
- use of a surge protector and grounded power bar for electric outlet

The physical environment of the work office is assessed to determine that there is:

- adequate lighting without glare
- ample desktop work area permitting reference materials to remain open without having to hold heavy dictionaries in the hands, which could cause an injury
- convenient, efficient organization of reference materials and office supplies
- telephone convenient to desk
- appropriate PC monitor height (the top of the monitor should be level with or slightly below the forehead; for individuals with bifocals, monitor should be placed directly on desktop)
- ergonomically suitable chair for individual transcriptionist that provides back support, allows for arms to remain in relaxed position near body, and permits feet to rest comfortably on the floor with calf at a 90 to 95 degree angle to the thighs
- carpeting that is secure without potential trip-injury hazards

The employee is asked to demonstrate a minimum of four stretching exercises from a handout provided by the Industrial Rehabilitation Department that are specifically recommended for individuals in sedentary occupations and verbalize understanding that these exercises are to be performed hourly during the time the individual is working.

The information security site survey checklist is completed. One issue of concern, particularly in light of software connection to the live system, is potential disclosure of patient information to visitors or family members who may be present in the home office. The employee is asked to verbalize understanding of measures to be taken to protect patient confidentiality (closing the door when out of the room, use of a screen blocker if there is a traffic pattern in the home that could potentially compromise privacy of records).

The evaluator also verifies that no patient identification is present on quality assurance reports or sample documents retained by the employee for reference purposes. The evaluator will then ask the employee to describe the shortest exit route from the home office to outside the home in the event of a fire. Following that description, the evaluator will place a chair to block that route and say, "There is another fire here keeping you from using that exit. How do you get outdoors now?"

The employee is reminded that smoke detectors and home fire extinguishers can help prevent property damage and personal injury.

Finally, the employee is asked to perform the remaining job competencies for medical transcriptionists. A new competency for home office evaluation specifically addresses some basic troubleshooting for PC network and dictation systems, as well as potential dial-up problems. The employee verbalizes understanding of the problem-reporting process.

At the conclusion of the visit, the evaluator reviews the home visit checklist with the employee and explains any recommendations or planned follow-up. The checklist is then forwarded to the transcription manager for use in the annual evaluation.

Strengthening the Bond

FMH's ongoing commitment to the home-based medical transcription program reflects its seven values: quality, empowerment, honesty and integrity, stewardship, responsibility, collaboration and teamwork, and respect and dignity.

By reinforcing the principles of home safety and good workplace ergonomics, the employees are empowered with the tools necessary to prevent repetitive stress injuries and other work-related hazards and achieve an injury-free workplace. The bond between the hospital and the home office is strengthened, so that resources that serve the specific needs of both entities may be developed. Educational programs that address the specific needs of the telecommuter may be developed.

All too often, employees working at home have seen themselves as somehow "less important" than hospital-based employees. FMH hopes that developing a home office evaluation program will reinforce the hospital's commitment to home-based employment and demonstrate the importance of home workers in the FMH team.

A Look at OSHA Standards

The proposed Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) standards for ergonomics weighed heavily in the development of the annual home evaluation for the FMH home-based transcriptionists. The working draft of the proposed ergonomics program standards (§1910.500 - §1910.512) is available at OSHA's Web site at www.osha.gov. The following outlines the standards cited in this article:

- 1910.501 Purpose of Standard
- 1910.502 Basic Obligation
- 1910.503 Management Leadership and Employee Participation
- 1910.504 Hazard Identification and Information
- 1910.505 Job Hazard Analysis and Control
- 1910.506 Training

The proposed OSHA ergonomics program will likely include implementation of educational and training programs for employees considered at risk for the development of work-related musculoskeletal disorders (WMSD). Medical transcriptionists, a class of employees performing repetitive keyboard activities, would certainly fit the profile as outlined in the proposed standard §1910.512:

1. WMSD hazards are present in a job in which a musculoskeletal disorder (MSD) has been reported
2. the hazards are reasonably likely to cause or contribute to the type of MSD reported
3. a significant part of the employee's regular job duties involves exposure to these WMSD hazards (i.e., not incidental exposure)

Based on the proposed standards, employer responsibilities would include recognizing signs and symptoms of WMSDs, hazards that are reasonably likely to be causing or contributing to WMSDs, and how to report signs and symptoms of WMSDs and WMSD hazards and make recommendations. The primary responsibility of the employee would be reporting

and participating in training and education programs. The proposed standard also calls for periodic training to address new developments in the workplace and to reinforce and retain the knowledge acquired in initial training.

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