CRISIS COMMUNICATIONS: PREPARING FOR THE UNKNOWN

On occasion, physicians and other health care providers may be targets of patient complaints, medical liability allegations, or other negative incidents. These situations can be frustrating, but there are steps to take that can help mitigate the issue and prevent it from spiraling into a crisis situation. The most important step in crisis communications is to proactively develop a plan so you are prepared and have a roadmap to follow when a situation emerges. An effective crisis communications plan should include the following:

1. **Determine the members of your "crisis communications team."**

   ▶ Consider which people in your organization should be involved; these should include staff who can manage communications (both internal and external), address any legal aspects (an outside attorney), provide medical expertise, and coordinate your efforts.

   ▶ Create a contact list with the emails and cell phones of those involved.

2. **When forming your team, determine if there is somebody who can effectively act as spokesperson(s) to communicate with outside audiences/stakeholders.**

   ▶ Effective spokespeople bring credibility and consistency to the situation, even in difficult times. They have a firm grasp on the implications of their comments, are prepared to deliver specific messages, and carefully choose their words when communicating with external audiences. They are calm, attentive, polite, and empathetic when dealing with all stakeholder groups in a crisis situation.

3. **Identify key stakeholder groups.**

   ▶ Stakeholder groups may differ from crisis to crisis, but examples of those to consider include:
      → Patients
      → Leadership teams/board of directors
      → Medical staff
      → Physician and medical associations
      → Employees
      → Partner organizations

4. **Outline the steps in your crisis communications process and the associated roles/responsibilities of team members.**

   ▶ Gather the facts:
      → How were we notified of the "crisis" situation and who was the source?
      → What are the facts associated with the situation? Note which facts are complete and if there is information that is still being gathered.
      → Who is aware of the situation, both internally and externally?
      → Who is involved with the situation?
      → Is the media aware of the situation?
      → Has a press release or other communication been distributed by an outside source? If so, who is that source and where/how has the communication been distributed?
      → Are there legal considerations that we need to highlight? What can or cannot be said related to these?
      → Are there regulatory situations that we need to consider?
      → What are the possible outcomes that we should plan for?

   ▶ Analyze the situation to determine the level of concern.
      → Where is the negative issue brewing? Figure out where comments or media coverage are originating from and follow these closely.
      → How much "noise" is being made about this particular topic? Keep in mind the context and size of the issue—is it one person who has posted a negative comment on a small blog or are you dealing with a highly visible story from a major media outlet?
      → Is the information blatantly inaccurate? This will help determine the level of urgency and what type of response is appropriate.

   ▶ Notify the crisis communications team lead(s) about the situation.