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LifeGuard Helps Physicians Recover Clinical Skills

LifeGuard, a new program administered by The Foundation of the Pennsylvania Medical Society, helps physicians who have raised quality concerns or fallen behind in clinical skills or education.

“This is a vital program that will give help to physicians who need it without judgment or punishment,” said Peter S. Lund, MD, past president of the Pennsylvania Medical Society.

The four-step LifeGuard program is modeled after the Foundation’s Physicians Health Programs (PHP), which offers help to physicians struggling with addiction, mental illness, or physical disabilities.

The program is nearing the end of its pilot phase and is accepting referrals.

“During the pilot phase, the Foundation has evaluated the need for the program, its potential funding sources, the success of the model, and the program’s consistency with our mission,” said Greg Gable, PsyD, Assistant Executive Director of the Foundation.

“LifeGuard has the potential to be beneficial for physicians because it might offer clinical pathways to address practice issues,” Gable added.

Physicians referred to LifeGuard because of quality concerns first undergo a cognitive and psychiatric screen, in which problems – such as acute psychiatric illness or cognitive deficits – are either ruled out or identified. Following this screening procedure, physicians can move on to clinical skill assessment using resources available from Pennsylvania medical schools, chart review, or testing modules.

If the need for advanced training is identified, LifeGuard develops individual remediation plans to refresh knowledge and skills in a medical school or protected practice setting.

LifeGuard then makes recommendations to the physician and the referral source about return to practice, modification of practice, and continuing education needs.

An additional category of physicians who may be able to benefit from the program involves those who want to reenter medicine after having been inactive for a period of time. Examples might include a physician who retired early and wants to return to work, or a parent who stopped working to participate in child rearing responsibilities and is now ready to reenter medicine.

These physicians are seeking a pathway for reentry that is designed for their particular needs and often includes a preceptorship or supervised re-entry work experience, among other components.

The Pennsylvania State Board of Medicine and LifeGuard are working together to manage dyscompetency or reentry to medical practice cases effectively.

A cooperative relationship between the State Board and the Foundation can be a valuable tool. The Board needs to know that physicians who want to reenter medicine after time away from the profession, as well as physicians about whom a significant practice concern has arisen, will be evaluated responsibly for knowledge and skill level, with remediation recommended when needed. The Foundation needs to know that a physician who is capable can be handled in a constructive way to dispose of practice or reentry concerns. The collaborative effort between these two entities makes sense in carrying out their common goal to ensure quality healthcare for the citizens of Pennsylvania.

“A program that provides objective, fair and responsive assistance to physicians with clinical competency problems or reentry issues will enhance physicians’ skills and improve patient care,” said Raymond C. Truex, Jr., MD, FACS, Chair of the Foundation Board.

The Foundation is currently seeking resources to support the continuing development of the LifeGuard program. It will be requesting consideration for funding from a number of potential partners in this endeavor.

For more information, contact Gable at 717-558-7863 or Virginia Henning, Foundation Executive Director at 717-558-7851.