A leader’s passion for patient safety

Creating a culture where patient safety is valued as the top priority by all and fostering an atmosphere of open dialogue. Those are twin passions of Elena Canacari, RN, CNOR, this year’s OR Manager of the Year.

For 6 years, Canacari has been director of perioperative services at 621-bed Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center, a Level 1 trauma center and Harvard teaching hospital in Boston. Her scope of responsibility spans 2 campuses and includes 40 ORs, 3 postanesthesia care units, preadmission testing, OR scheduling, central processing, and a business unit with a total of more than 500 FTEs. She came to New England Deaconess Hospital in 1970 and later worked at Beth Israel. The two hospitals merged in 1997.

Integrity and trust

The 14 nominating letters from colleagues describe a leader who has “an innate sense of professionalism, team leadership, even-handedness, and equi- ty at all times,” as the chief of general surgery, Mark P. Callery, MD, wrote.

“I simply could not do my job without Elena’s advice, tutelage, expertise, wisdom, skill, sweat equity, and business savvy,” wrote Malcolm M. DeCamp, MD, the chief of cardiothoracic surgery. He describes Canacari as “the ‘glue’ that holds the entire surgical enterprise together.”

“Elena’s every word and action is grounded in integrity and trust. She offers strength and support during change with a clear focus and direction,” said Barbara DeTullio, RN, BSN, MA, nurse manager of the East and West ORs, and Susan Dorion, RN, MSN, nurse manager of the perianesthesia areas.

“No one does this alone,” says Canacari, who credits a strong team of staff, managers, and physicians with helping her to manage such a huge job skillfully. She also cites experience gained through a range of major projects. A few examples are moving acute care services from one campus to the other, standardizing and integrating procedure-based delivery systems and preference lists for the merged organization, and opening 3 new ambulatory surgery units. Adding to her background are a National Patient Safety Leadership Fellowship, contributions to national position statements for AORN, and service with the local AORN chapter.

A ‘burning platform’

Asked what she is proudest of, Canacari cites the department’s response to a wrong-site surgery a year and a half ago. That event, she says, created a “burning platform” that renewed efforts to create a united effort on patient safety.

“Elena took charge, rallying the entire hospital community to improve community and safety,” wrote David S. Chapin, MD, of the Department of Obstetrics & Gynecology.

Marsha Maurer, RN, MS, senior vice president, patient care services, and
chief nurse, says Canacari “helped spearhead substantial changes to our time-out process,” including implementing a standard “scripted” time-out throughout perioperative services. Part of that was making sure the entire team is engaged and pauses for a “moment of reverence” before the incision.

Among other safety initiatives Canacari has fostered:

• a weekly huddle with the chiefs of each surgical division and senior administrators to bring up safety issues
• a patient safety task force, including anesthesia providers, surgeons, and OR staff
• quarterly patient safety grand rounds attended by some 450 anesthesia providers, surgeons, and staff.

Attributes of leadership

What attributes does Canacari think have served her best in managing her complex responsibilities? She says it’s important to take time to listen and reflect.

“I’ve been thoughtful before assuming a new role and have made sure I had the full support of my family,” she says.

Day-to-day, she tries not to be reactive to situations but “to listen, think, and be reflective” before taking action.

Canacari holds a diploma in nursing from Cambridge City Hospital, Cambridge, Massachusetts. Her perioperative nursing career began more than 40 years ago when, as a new graduate nurse, she was assigned to the OR. She learned that she loved it and has risen to become a successful perioperative leader.