





Competencies: A Technician's Perspective

BY NATALIE LIND, CRCST, CHL, FHSPA, DIRECTOR OF EDUCATION—HSPA

Certified Instrument Specialist (CIS) lessons provide members with ongoing education in the complex and ever-changing area of surgical instrument care and handling. These lessons are designed for CIS technicians, but can be of value to any CRCST technician who works with surgical instrumentation.

Earn Continuing Education Credits

Online: Visit www.myhspa.org for online grading.

By mail: For written grading of individual lessons, send completed quiz and \$15 to: Purdue Online – Central Service Young Hall, Room 448 155 S. Grant St. West Lafayette, IN 47907

Subscription series: Purdue Extended Campus offers an annual mail-in or online self-study lesson subscription for \$75 (six specific lessons worth two credits each toward CIS recertification of six credits). Call 765.494.0959 for details.

Scoring: Each quiz with a passing score is worth two continuing education (CE) credits toward your CRCST recertification (12 credits).

More information: HSPA provides online grading service for any of the Lesson Plan varieties. **Note: Purdue University provides grading services ONLY for CRCST and CIS lessons. Please do not send the CHL or CER lessons to Purdue for grading.** Direct questions about online grading to HSPA at 312.440.0078. Questions about written grading are answered by Purdue University at 765.494.0959.

For paper/pencil scoring requests, please allow up to two weeks for grading.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Define competencies and understand their application in Sterile Processing
2. Learn why competencies are integral to quality outcomes
3. Learn how technicians can use competencies to improve skills

Providing complete, safe and functional instruments that are delivered on time is one of the Sterile Processing department's (SPD's) biggest responsibilities. Failure at any phase in the process can result in procedural delays and other operational disruptions and, most importantly, negative patient outcomes, including infections. Simply put, error prevention must always be prioritized.

Given the high stakes, Sterile Processing (SP) professionals must meet strict quality requirements. That requires solid planning and a comprehensive system that includes ongoing education and competencies.

Objective 1: Define competencies and understand their application in Sterile Processing

All jobs require employees to be competent, meaning they possess the skills and knowledge needed to perform their roles effectively. The only way to ensure that training has

been successful and employees are able to make good decisions and perform their job duties correctly is to measure the effectiveness of training. In simpler terms, this means that employees understand what to do and have the knowledge to do it safely, effectively and consistently.

The SP discipline requires specific technical skills, attention to detail, and the ability to make correct decisions to provide good service and help ensure patients receive quality care. Competency goes hand in hand with quality by helping ensure employees are prepared to perform their duties correctly. Competencies evaluate ability and send a message to employees that the expectation for accuracy and quality is high. All employees should understand that and know they must meet those expectations. Competency also serves a purpose when issues arise. In many cases, repeated errors can be traced back to an incomplete, outdated or confusing competency document. Making the appropriate changes can prevent future issues.



The goal of every competency is to measure whether the employee can perform the task correctly; those measurements can take many forms. For example, a checklist may be used to determine if an employee understands how to load a sterilizer correctly. Checklists can also be used to measure many multi-step procedures. Although checklists are the most common type of competency assessment in Sterile Processing, others can also be effective. For example, a list of oral questions may help determine if an employee knows what to do in the event of a load recall, fire or other disaster. It is difficult to reenact those situations, but employees can explain the steps they would take and other things they would need to consider. The questions should be written, and employee responses noted to create a document that is kept on file.

Some competencies may be best measured with written answers. For example, a copy of a sterilizer printout can be provided, and the technician can identify the stages in the cycle and determine whether the load met requirements. Observation can be another effective competency measurement. Watching trainees inspect instruments, test scissors sharpness, and perform other essential tasks can provide valuable insight into an individual's skills.

Through effective planning and execution, a competency system can improve quality by elevating understanding of tasks and reducing errors.

Objective 2: Learn why competencies are integral to quality outcomes

Competencies should never be used as a “gotcha” approach to set up or single out employees. They are not petty ways to point out errors, but rather essential safeguards developed and implemented to sharpen knowledge and enhance understanding and skills around various tasks. The powerful end result is promoting safe, effective processes and practices that drive quality service to healthcare customers and promote positive patient outcomes.

Departmental managers may assume that all SP staff members understand the value and purpose of competencies, but that is not always the case. Many employees may have only a basic level of understanding; others may not see the value and perhaps view competencies as extra work or a time-robbing nuisance without a specific benefit. Such misunderstandings can be a significant detriment to quality and safety.

Failure to understand the purpose of competencies may lead to skipped steps or competency completions that do not accurately measure the skills and knowledge of the trainee. Either situation increases the risk of error. It is essential that all employees receive education that underscores the purpose of competencies and their role in professional development and service excellence.

It is important to recognize that documented competencies are also required by surveying agencies, regulatory agencies and standards organizations. The goal of all these entities is the same as the healthcare facility's: to enhance patient safety.

Objective 3: Learn how technicians can use competencies to improve skills

Competencies are sometimes perceived as documents for beginners; however, they are for every employee. Each time a new process or skill is added to job requirements, all technicians are beginners. Therefore, the first benefit of competencies is to demonstrate that every employee is properly trained to perform all tasks. Training should never be something where some employees are “grandfathered” in.

For most technicians, the job begins with learning basic skills and establishing good work habits. After that, the technician looks to improve speed and learn to see the bigger picture of the task, such as prioritizing workload or communicating with the Operating Room.


Competencies offer other ways to grow as well. Working with new employees, going through their training, and measuring their competencies provides a different perspective on the job duties. That perspective can be enhanced by becoming involved with new competency development and updates for existing competencies. Both opportunities provide greater insight into the system and enhance the technician's knowledge, understanding and expertise.

In some cases, technicians may request to learn new skills for another area of interest. An example might be learning a task or improving competency to assist the team during especially busy times or staff shortages (i.e., an instrument technician learning more advanced skills to assist the instrument lead when needed). Such



additional knowledge increases understanding of the system and helps ensure that technicians are prepared and confident to assist with certain duties as needed.

Conclusion

Many individuals who have faced surgery for themselves or a loved one think of all that can go wrong if an error occurs. There is nothing more important than having competent professionals support surgery and other patient procedures. Whether it is a known patient or a stranger, every person deserves the highest quality that SP professionals can provide. Measuring the effectiveness of training through a well-designed competency program is vital for elevating technicians' skills, confidence and ability—all of which enable them to perform roles and responsibilities safely and effectively to promote service quality and positive patient outcomes. 

THE Career Center

The premier online recruitment resource for the Sterile Processing profession.

Employers can find qualified, experienced candidates

AND

Job seekers can search for open positions and prepare to take the next step in their career.

Visit www.myhspa.org/resources/career-center/



HSPA 



CIS Self-Study Lesson Plan Quiz: Competencies: A Technician's Perspective

Lesson No. CIS 314 (Instrument Continuing Education – ICE) · Lesson expires June 2029

1. Competency is defined as:
 - a. Prolonged employment, with no reported errors
 - b. The possession of sufficient knowledge or skills
 - c. The ability to write procedures
 - d. Maintaining certification
2. Repeated errors:
 - a. Can often be traced to an incomplete, outdated or confusing competency document
 - b. Are always cause for termination
 - c. Require prompt intervention from Risk Management
 - d. Are typically the result of an inexperienced educator
3. A checklist:
 - a. Is used to determine if an employee understands a task (i.e., how to load a sterilizer correctly)
 - b. Is ineffective for measuring multi-step procedures
 - c. Is not an appropriate tool for competency assessment
 - d. Is effective only when used with written tests and a return demonstration
4. Surveying agencies, standards organizations and healthcare facilities share which common goal?
 - a. Increasing efficiencies
 - b. Enhancing patient safety
 - c. Attaining zero-error status
 - d. Standardizing processes
5. When a new process or skill is added to job requirements, experienced technicians can be "grandfathered" in.
 - a. True
 - b. False
6. Training others and performing competency measurements:
 - a. Helps technicians develop a better understanding of the job
 - b. Often leads to a pay increase
 - c. Provides the experience required to become a staff educator
 - d. All the above
7. Failure to understand the purpose of competencies may lead to:
 - a. Unpaid repeated training
 - b. Skipped steps or competency completions that don't measure the skills and knowledge of the trainee
 - c. Immediate demotion or job loss
 - d. Cited deficiencies and intervention from Risk Management
8. Most technicians' job begins with:
 - a. Learning basic skills and establishing good work habits
 - b. Improving speed
 - c. Learning the most minor details
 - d. A week of classroom learning
9. Emphasis on Sterile Processing (SP) quality:
 - a. Applies mostly to SP leaders
 - b. Is seldom part of training in clinics
 - c. Is most vital when errors increase
 - d. Sets a high standard for performance
10. When SP-related errors occur:
 - a. SP staff should be immediately evaluated for competency
 - b. The competencies involved should be reviewed to determine if a revision is needed
 - c. Retraining must occur within 24 hours
 - d. Additional staff should be added
11. A well-executed competency program:
 - a. Can improve patient safety
 - b. Requires a dedicated SP educator
 - c. Eliminates conflicts with the OR
 - d. All the above
12. Competency is most important for technical jobs.
 - a. True
 - b. False
13. Which statement is accurate?
 - a. Technicians may request to learn competencies for other areas of interest
 - b. Skilled employees can skip competency training
 - c. Technicians may skip training if it does not fit their skill set
 - d. None of the above
14. Competency goes hand in hand with quality by:
 - a. Preventing all errors
 - b. Helping ensure employees are prepared to perform their duties correctly
 - a. Ensuring employees can perform each task as quickly as possible to prevent procedural delays
 - b. All the above
15. Using competencies to single out employees:
 - a. Is an effective way to correct process failures
 - b. Is never appropriate
 - c. Can be effective if employees have not learned from previous mistakes
 - d. Is a common Human Resources approach to quality

Request for paper/pencil scoring

(Please print or type information)

- I have enclosed the scoring fee of \$15. (Please make checks payable to Purdue University. We regret that no refunds can be given.)
- Check here if you have a change of address.
- Check here if you wish to have your results emailed to you.

Detach quiz, fold and return to:

Purdue Online – Central Service
Young Hall, Room 448
155 S. Grant St.
West Lafayette, IN 47907

For paper/pencil scoring requests, please allow up to two weeks for grading.

Name _____

Mailing Address (Be sure to include apartment number or post office box.) _____

City _____ State/Province _____ Zip Code/Postal Code _____

Daytime Telephone _____ HSPA Membership Number _____

Email Address _____

If your name has changed in the last 12 months, please provide your former name. Purdue University is an equal access/equal opportunity institution.