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St. Luke's pursues ridding waste, increasing efficiency

The St. Luke's Health System is doing more than completing construction on its new Twin Falls hospital set to open later this year. The non-profit health system also is working on an initiative known internally as "Lean."

On Thursday, St. Luke's personnel gathered at the College of Southern Idaho to learn more about the way the health system is working to change its future workforce.



Frankie Dixon, left, and Willard Bunham, both of Balanced Rock Electric, install lights in an operating room at the new St. Luke's hospital, Friday in Twin Falls.

CEO Mike Reno described the initiative, used by the Toyota Motor Corp., as the hospital's plan to raise efficiencies and cut costs across the board. "As an industry we're not very patient oriented," Reno said. "Part of being Lean is getting back to the mindset that our value should be defined by our customers, the

patients."

Reno said patients may not notice any big difference in their care but the initiative is focused not only on increasing value, but the quality of patient care. "One example," Reno told the Times-News, "is when a patient is asked the same questions when they come in for surgery. They're asked the same questions by admitting, multiple nurses, radiology ... on and on. Sometimes, patients may be asked certain questions to verify their identity, but sometimes it simply overlaps and it's waste. That costs a lot of time."

That's just one example. Although St. Luke's expects the model to become part of its core culture, it is starting small. Results are already being noticed since the process began about a year ago. "In 2010, we saw a savings of \$498,000 in operating room medical-supply costs from instituting Lean processes," said Laura Stewart, St. Luke's marketing and public relations coordinator.

To save that much money, St. Luke's completely reconfigured the way it purchased, received and distributed operating room supplies.

Instead of ordering supplies and having many levels of personnel break the supplies into separate department stashes and then into usable patient units, they have cut out the middle steps and initiated a just-in-time inventory control. "Now our supplies come in units and we're realizing savings," Reno said.

Hospital 1

During Thursday's event a team from St. Luke's Boise hospital were on hand to relay changes among staff. They're currently working on the relationship between nursing and pharmacy departments. Previously, they saw each other as separate entities but now they are working like a cohesive unit, all on the same team.

Clinical Supervisor Keyana Osther said it's important to take every task and break it down into steps, assigning accountability and measurable goals to each and every step. "We're learning ... that if we don't get something done there is accountability and we have to admit to failing when it happens," Osther said.

There are challenges to getting all of the system's staff behind the movement, Reno reported. "We're having some difficulty in branding Lean," Reno said. "So we may want to change what we call it. Lean shouldn't be associated with anything negative."

Although upper management has pledged no jobs will be eliminated as the result of a Lean initiative, some employees believe increased efficiencies could result in the system needing fewer employees on payroll.

Overall, the ongoing process has been positive and Reno looks forward to many more departments and employees coming on board. "We have to manage how this new system is brought into place," he said.