Survey Reveals Lack of Response to Alarm Problems

Even though ineffective alarm management and “nuisance alarms” are widely recognized as significant problems in healthcare, relatively few hospitals are working on solutions, according to a new national survey of healthcare professionals.

Less than 20% of the respondents in the survey by the Healthcare Technology Foundation (HTF) reported that their facility had instituted technological solutions to improve clinical alarm safety, and only one in five said that their facility had developed alarm improvement initiatives over the past two years, according to the survey, which had 4,278 responses.

“Clinical alarm improvement efforts need to be stepped up in healthcare institutions,” says the HTF in one of the recommendations that accompanied the results.

The survey was conducted Aug. 8–Sept. 10, 2011, and was sponsored by AAMI, the American College of Clinical Engineering (ACCE), and Philips Healthcare. It was released during the AAMI Medical Device Alarms Summit, which was held Oct. 4–5 in Herndon, VA.

Most of the respondents worked in acute care hospitals, and consisted of nurses, biomedical equipment technicians, and clinical engineers. Nearly half of the respondents were respiratory therapists.

J. Tobey Clark, president of the foundation, says he was surprised by the small number of hospitals tackling the problem. “What was not surprising was the high agreement that nuisance alarms are the biggest problem, and that adverse events are occurring,” says Clark, director of Instrumentation and Technical Services at the University of Vermont in Burlington, VT.

“Frequent false alarms” was identified by 33.3% of the respondents as the most important issue, followed by “inadequate staff to respond to alarms” (14.5%), and “difficulty in hearing alarms when they occur” (11.5%).

False alarms was identified as the most important issue when the survey was originally conducted in 2006. The HTF performed the survey again this year to determine any changes in the healthcare field regarding alarm issues.

Alarm management is very important to respiratory therapists, which explains the high response rate among those professionals, says Tom Kallstrom, associate executive director and chief operating officer of the American Association for Respiratory Care in Irving, TX.

“The most common alarm devices that respiratory therapists encounter on a daily basis are on mechanical ventilators and monitoring devices,” he says. “It is imperative that when a device sounds it is responded to. Thus, the need for a differentiation of alarm is essential both in display and sound.”

To read the full survey, visit www.thehtf.org.