PRIMARY SOURCE VERIFICATION OF MEDICAL STAFF IN HOSPITALS

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INTRODUCTION:

Primary source verification is the process of verifying all credentials of a physician directly from the source. The credentials that are usually verified are education, residency training, fellowship training, licensure, board certification and previous employment in other health care facilities. All trainings completed by the physician should be verified even if it was done in another country or a long time ago.

Performing primary source verification ensures that the physicians' credentials and training are legitimate and that he/she is qualified and properly trained to treat patients. This will help reduce liability, malpractice claims and improve patient safety by reducing medical errors.

Another added value to performing primary source verification is by meeting Joint Commission International (JCI) requirements. All hospitals applying for JCI should perform primary source verification for new applicants 4 months prior to the survey and have completed verification for all medical staff by the time the organization has its 3 year accreditation survey (1)

STARTING FROM SCRATCH, STEPS TO FOLLOW:

Step 1- Create the verification waiver form:

A verification waiver form should be created to include the following items:
- Permission from the physician allowing the hospital to inquire about his/her credentials, qualifications, previous training and previous employment.
- Name of the institutions from which the physician received his medical degree, trainings, board certification, and previous employment(s).
- Personal information of the physician to include: Address, telephone number, email of the physician.
- Signature of the physician and date.

This form will then be distributed to all existing medical staff in the hospital to complete it with the relevant information. The verification waiver form should be added to the forms to be completed for initial application to medical staff so that primary source verification can be done for initial applicants.

Step 2 - Divide medical staff into categories:

The second step is to divide the existing medical staff into four categories. The following categories are defined as follows:
- **Category A** – Physicians who are newly appointed, very clinically active, involved in invasive/high-risk procedures
- **Category B** – Physicians who are clinically active but are not involved in invasive/high-risk procedures
- **Category C** – Physicians who are not clinically very active (low-volume practitioners), or only provide primary care such as Family Medicine practitioners.
- **Category D** – Physicians who do not provide direct care to patients (no-volume practitioners).

Health care organizations should start primary source verification for newly appointed physicians and for physicians who are already appointed by the hospital and involved in invasive/high-risk procedures. When primary source verification for Category A is completed, the same process can be done for the rest of the categories until the credentials for all physicians in the hospital are verified.

Step 3 – Contact institutions for verification of credentials:

The credentials that need to be verified are:

- Medical doctor degree
- Residency training(s)
- Fellowship training(s)
- Maintenance of board certification (can be done online)
- Lebanese Order of Physicians (LOP) current registration
- Previous experience – reference letters provided by the applicant (it is the duty of hospitals to verify previous affiliations, privileges /clinical responsibilities/ work history and current competency)

Who to contact for Primary Source Verification?

Search on the internet for the hospital/ institution/clinic/ board from where the credential was issued. Some institutions provide an online verification for their trainees/ diplomats like board certification. In case of fellowship training or special training, in certain techniques or procedures, the department or division where the training was completed should be contacted for verification requests. For verifying residency training, the relevant department or Graduate Medical Education Office or a similarly named office should be contacted.

The verification process will be initiated by the hospital by contacting hospitals/universities/clinics etc. where the physician completed his/her MD degree, graduate, postgraduate training(s). An official letter with a copy of the verification waiver form of the physician and a copy of the certificate of education or training will be sent to the institution from which verification is requested.

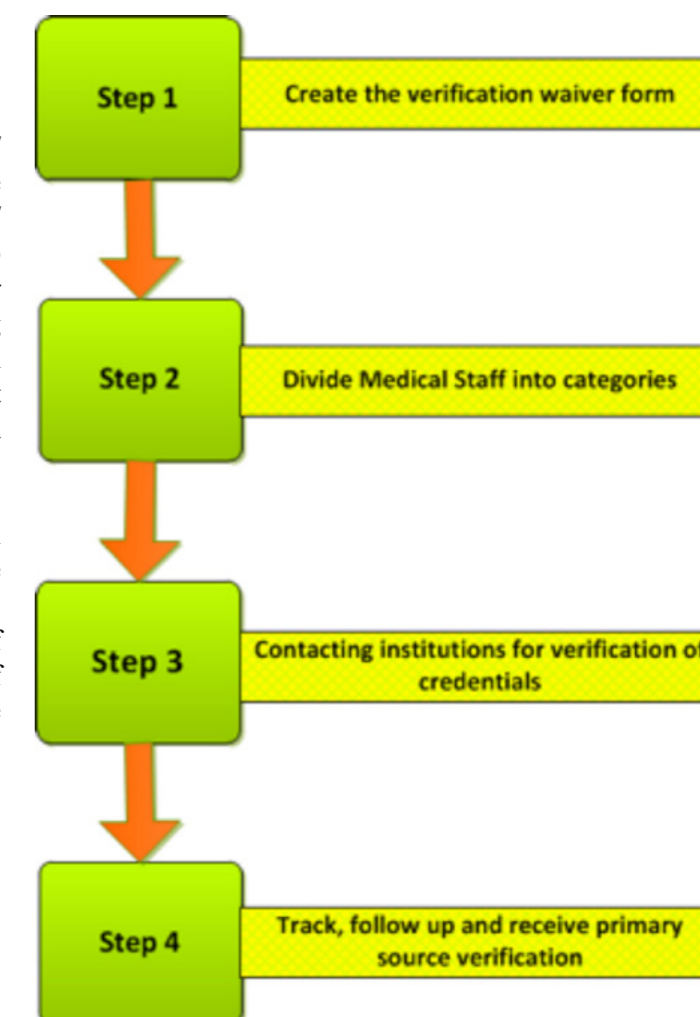Methods that can be used to contact institutions are:
- email
- fax
- mail post
- telephone

Step 4 – Track, follow up and receive primary source verification of credentials:

Tracking of verification should be done using detailed spread sheets to help know the status of verification of every physician's credential. A copy of all documents sent for each verification request should be kept in the physician's file. This makes it easier to get back to details when required.

The JCI requires that at least two attempts should be done per training. A follow up should be done after 3 months of the initial attempt. If there is no response after the second attempt, the verification should be sent to another contact person or another relevant department in the institution. Sometimes several attempts are required to get a response.

There should be no interference by an outside party and the

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physician should not be involved in this process. However, he or she should be responsible for the facilitation of the information, particularly if the source is not responding. Even in such cases, the source cannot send the information to the physician – the information should be sent directly to the hospital. Documents, diplomas, certificate and transcripts provided directly by the applicant are not accepted as primary source verification.

SUBSTITUTES TO PRIMARY SOURCE VERIFICATION:

The following are acceptable substitute to primary source verification:
- An affiliated hospital that has already conducted primary source verification that already has JCI accreditation and "full compliance" on its verification process and provides the original documents or photocopies of the verification reports it has relied upon for decision making.
- A third party that is a governmental or non-governmental agency that performed primary source verification for the physicians' credentials. They are called Credentials Verification Organizations (CVOs). These agencies should be evaluated by the hospital and

there should be confidence in the completeness, accuracy, and timeliness of verification information provided. CVOs are an alternative when the hospital does not have the staff, time and resources to do this function. Place the burden of the fees for CVOs on the applicant.

WHAT TO DO WHEN VERIFICATION OF A CREDENTIAL CANNOT BE DONE:

There are several situations when primary source verification cannot be done. They are:
- the building was demolished
- old records are not retained beyond a period of time
- disaster
- no response from the institution contacted

In this case, a detailed record of the attempts for verification should be retained in the physicians' file and the reason for lack of verification should be documented.

References

1. Joint Commission of International Accreditation, Hospital Standards, 4th edition, Staff Qualifications and Education Jan 2011