Purpose of the Project
This report examines evidence-based medication safety Quality Improvement (QI) programs and strategies that could be implemented in Critical Access Hospitals (CAHs).

Background
Hospital QI programs to improve medication safety management focus on identifying medication safety risks and prevention of medication errors. Many patient safety and medication safety initiatives were originally motivated by the seminal Institute of Medicine report *To Err is Human* (Kohn 1999).

Over the past decade, medication safety has gained emphasis as a major health issue via numerous high-profile safety events (Kilbridge 2002). It is estimated that adverse drug events (ADE) occur in 6.5% to more than 20% of hospitalized patients (Bates 1995, Classen 1991, Rozich 2003). Although many of these are avoidable, there is disagreement among researchers regarding which types of issues have the greatest impact on medication safety as well as the degree to which those issues are preventable (Classen 2003).

Medication safety is an important focus area in the Medicare Beneficiary Quality Improvement Project (MBQIP). The Federal Office of Rural Health Policy (ORHP) created MBQIP specifically to improve the quality of care for Medicare beneficiaries served by CAHs. An MBQIP Phase 3 quality measure is the percent of medication orders that are directly-entered (Computerized Prescriber Order Entry, or CPOE) or verified by a pharmacist within 24 hours for patients admitted to a CAH as an inpatient or a swing bed patient.

As part of its accreditation process, the Joint Commission has adopted comprehensive medication safety quality standards, which are described in the Comprehensive Accreditation Manual for Critical Access Hospitals (Joint Commission 2013). However, only 30% of the 1,328 CAHs are accredited by the Joint Commission (Casey 2011).

Approach
Our approach combined an extensive literature review with a survey of State Flex Coordinators. We reviewed and synthesized articles in peer-reviewed healthcare journals and reports from a variety of public and private organizations which were focused on QI programs and strategies promoting inpatient medication safety—particularly those which were found to be effective in CAHs and small rural hospitals. We also identified programs and strategies that hold promise for
adoption in the small rural hospital environment.

To identify additional QI programs and strategies that have not been documented in the literature, we surveyed state Flex Coordinators about medication safety activities in the CAHs within their states. The survey was administered via the internet and by phone: 18 Coordinators completed the survey; their states collectively include 616 CAHs (46% of CAHs nationwide). One of the states had multiple informants. The responding states included: Florida, Illinois, Indiana, Kentucky, Michigan, Minnesota, Mississippi, Montana, Nebraska, North Carolina, North Dakota, Ohio, Pennsylvania, South Dakota, Tennessee, Utah, Washington, and West Virginia.

Results
Of the 18 states that completed our survey, 12 reported having medication safety projects, including 10 that had been active for more than a year and two projects that were completed. Two more states were planning projects. Project goals provided by the responding states vary but include the following: increase event reporting for medication errors, improve medication safety culture and infrastructure generally, identify environmental issues that could lead to a medication error, reduce patient harm from specific commonly-used medications, and/or to educate providers about medication safety.

Eight responding states specified ways in which medication safety projects aim to measure their progress. The measures cited most often: numbers of medication errors, numbers of hospitals with active medication safety programs, numbers of hospitals with medication error reporting systems, and the presence or absence of safety protocols for specific medications. One responding state measured whether or not patient discharge instructions included listing medications. A project that facilitates advisory visits from project staff at participating hospitals tracks the number of hospitals visited, total visits, immediate issues identified during advisor visits, whether or not an advisor report was provided to a hospital following a visit, the number of advisor report items that result in board (quality, hospital, or other) recommendations and improvements, and whether or not hospitals complied with recommendations for improvement.

The nature of the projects varied: nine responding states located at least one project in inpatient facilities, three in outpatient facilities, two in emergency departments, one in clinics, and four in other locations. Nine respondents reported that their states’ projects focused on medication administration safety, prescribing safety, and dispensing safety; and projects in seven states focused on medication reconciliation. Projects in four states provided medication education—all four of those provided education for nursing staff, three also provided education for prescribing staff, two for dispensing staff, and one for patients.

Participants included nurses (identified by 9 respondents), pharmacists (8 respondents), physicians (5 respondents), administrative staff (5 respondents), nurse practitioners and physician assistants (4 respondents), and quality improvement (QI) staff (2 respondents).

Results were positive and encouraging: 10 responding states reported that the projects in their state were successful in improving medication safety. Three cited a significant increase in the implementation of medication safety protocols at hospitals within their states, two cited an increase in the reporting of adverse drug events, and two others pointed out that medication safety programs had raised awareness of relevant issues and/or led to systematic reviews and improvements of existing protocols. One respondent reported that state-level projects led to the establishment of a “non-punitive environment” with respect to reporting medication safety issues/events and also increased the investment in and utilization of pharmacy HIT among participating facilities. Two cited very specific outcomes: in one case, medication safety projects resulted in an increase of facility-approved protocols and a decrease in potential adverse drug events for Coumadin, heparin, insulin, narcotics, and sedatives. Another respondent stated that numerous serious safety events have been avoided as a result of a medication safety project.

These survey findings were generally supported by the peer-reviewed literature. Contextualizing the key findings of published research with reports from state and national organizations working on medication safety issues and our survey of State Flex Coordinators, we have identified five strategies that CAHs can pursue to improve medication safety:

1. maintain adequate pharmacist and nurse staffing,
2. improve nurses’ workflow,
3. adopt effective medication reconciliation strategies,
4. implement appropriate technology (telehealth), and
5. foster a culture of accountability that values quality improvement.

The evidence supporting these strategies, as well as a list of several resources and tools that could be useful for CAHs
wishing to improve medication safety, follows.

**Strategies for CAHs to improve medication safety:**

- The recent AHRQ Making Health Safer II report encourages the use of clinical pharmacists to reduce adverse drug events (Shekelle 2013).

- Pharmacist staffing has been shown to be important in the areas of medication preparation, cross checking of laboratory values, monitoring of look-alike and high-risk medications and preventing ADE's (Classen 2003, Pedersen 2012, Bond 2002).

- Research in best practices in medication safety in rural hospitals has demonstrated the importance of pharmacist staffing (Jones 2004, Stevenson 2004, Casey 2006).

- Active pharmacist participation in hospital committees that address medication safety is significantly related to implementation of four key medication safety practices: a high alert drug list, a do not use abbreviation list, using two identifiers for administering drugs and having two independent checks for high alert medication dosages (Casey 2006).


- Nurse staffing ratios have been shown to influence the number of errors in hospitals (Needleman 2002).

- Nurses’ workflow is also an important factor in ensuring medication safety during administration and monitoring of patients (Westbrook 2010, Pape 2005).

- The process of effective medication reconciliation involves comparison of a patient’s current medication regimen against a physician’s admission, transfer, or discharge orders to identify discrepancies.

- Medication reconciliation combines the need for patient information and expert review of medications, interactions, and side-effects. There are frequent errors in this area during transitions of care, with 35% to 67% of patients having at least one discrepancy in this area (Gleason 2004, Gleason 2010, Tam 2005).

- The recent AHRQ Making Health Safer II report encourages medication reconciliation, particularly during transitions, to reduce adverse drug events (Shekelle 2013).

- Study data show that specific attention to effective medication processes, such as pharmacist-led medication review, reconciliation and counseling, taking accurate medication histories (particularly in older patients with a large number of medications), clearly defining roles and building care partnerships, and use of a discharge survey can detect and avert many medication discrepancies, potentially avoiding a large number of adverse drug events and related costs for care of affected patients (Kripalani 2007, Schipper 2006, Gleason 2004, Gleason 2010, Greenwald 2010, Whittington 2004, Pronovost 2003, Boockvar 2003, Bates 1997).
How can State Flex Programs help CAHs improve medication safety outcomes?

- Encourage CAHs to use the evidence-based programs, tools, and resources highlighted in this policy brief.
- Provide technical assistance and support to help CAHs implement evidence-based QI activities.
- Facilitate the comparison of QI practices among CAHs.
- Foster collaborative relationships between CAHs and QIOs.
- Support CAHs as they participate in local or national medication safety initiatives.

Create an environment of quality.

- Various aspects of HIT, including CPOE, pharmacist access to laboratory data, and enhanced ability to perform medication reconciliation have been shown to improve medication safety (Ohsfeldt 2005, Hagland 2011, Karowski 2002, Kaushal 2002, Kaushal 2003, Moore 2011).
- Technology alone does not guarantee medication safety. Staff buy-in is imperative: studies in large hospitals showed that nurses developed informal workarounds after technology implementation (Wulff 2011, Hurley 2007).
- As in other areas of quality improvement, creating an improvement-oriented environment is vital to achieving medication safety (Branowicki 2003, Classen 2003).
- Voluntary reporting of medication errors is shown to be dependent on pharmacist staffing and support (Jones 2004).
- An effective quality environment includes both appropriate organizational support (Vogus 2007, Fogery 2006, Winterstein 2006) and the organization’s ability to learn from teams (Moore 2011, Wulff 2011).
- Perhaps most important, a hospital of any size must create an environment that supports and encourages non-punitive reporting (Voelker 2001, Santamour 2009).

Conclusion

Despite the fact that numerous studies examine and evaluate ways to improve medication safety, few do so specifically with respect to CAHs. More research is clearly needed, as is more reporting of tools, outcomes, and concerns related to medication safety enhancement projects with CAHs; however, reports from State Flex programs indicate that CAHs are finding useful tools. There is also evidence that working collaboratively can help CAHs improve medication safety and reduce the frequency of adverse drug events.

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Institute for Safe Medication Practices (ISMP)

*ISMP Medication Safety Self-Assessment:* the 2011 ISMP Medication Safety Self-Assessment® for Hospitals is designed to heighten awareness of distinguishing characteristics of a safe hospital medication system. The self-assessment is divided into ten key elements that significantly influence safe medication use. Each element is defined by one or more core characteristics that further define a safe medication use system. Each core characteristic contains individual self-assessment items to help you evaluate your success with achieving that characteristic. Explicit instructions on how to complete the assessment are included. Available at [http://www.ismp.org/selfassessments/default.asp](http://www.ismp.org/selfassessments/default.asp). Many additional ISMP resources (webinars, paper tools, guidelines, and links to other websites) are free and available at [http://www.ismp.org/Tools/default.asp](http://www.ismp.org/Tools/default.asp).

Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality (AHRQ)

*Medications at Transitions and Clinical Handoffs (MATCH) Toolkit for Medication Reconciliation:* this toolkit incorporates the experiences and lessons learned by health care facilities that have implemented MATCH strategies to improve their medication reconciliation processes for patients as they move through health care settings. Funded by AHRQ, the toolkit is AHRQ Publication No. 11(12)-0059. Available at: [http://www.innovations.ahrq.gov/content.aspx?id=3360](http://www.innovations.ahrq.gov/content.aspx?id=3360)

Institute for Healthcare Improvement (IHI)


*IHI’s “Protecting 5 Million Lives From Harm” campaign:* includes strategies to 1) prevent harm from high-alert medications, starting with a focus on anticoagulants, sedatives, narcotics, and insulin; and 2) prevent Adverse Drug Events (ADEs) by implementing effective medication reconciliation processes. Available at: [http://www.ihi.org/offerings/Initiatives/PastStrategicInitiatives/5MillionLivesCampaign/Pages/default.aspx](http://www.ihi.org/offerings/Initiatives/PastStrategicInitiatives/5MillionLivesCampaign/Pages/default.aspx)

American Society of Health System Pharmacists (ASHP)

The AHSP Small and Rural Hospital Resource Center has links to guidelines, policies, best practices, and tools that are relevant to small rural hospitals. [http://www.ashp.org/smallhospitals](http://www.ashp.org/smallhospitals)

Rural Assistance Center (RAC)

RAC, an online library devoted entirely to rural health and human services topics, is funded by the Office of Rural Health Policy and provides free access to resources, tools, news, success stories, funding opportunities, contacts, and more. MLS-credentialed librarians with subject expertise in rural health topics curate more than 80 topic guides relevant to CAHs and the five strategies outlined in this brief:

- Pharmacy and Prescription Drugs Topic Guide: [http://www.raconline.org/topics/pharmacy/](http://www.raconline.org/topics/pharmacy/)

RAC also maintains a collection of rural success stories and lessons learned, designed to facilitate collaboration and promote best practices. Organizations are encouraged to submit stories for addition to the database; medication safety initiatives in particular: [http://www.raconline.org/success/suggestion.php](http://www.raconline.org/success/suggestion.php)
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