Ask George

In this column, *BI&T* features questions and answers between AAMI members and George Mills, MBA, FASHE, CEM, CHFM, CHSP, director of the Department of Engineering at The Joint Commission. Become part of the discussion and ask questions about those subjects that matter to you the most.

You can submit your Joint Commission question at this link: www.aami.org/tmcconnect/askgeorge.html. Or to join AAMI's Joint Commission e-forum, which is open to all AAMI members, visit www.aami.org/tmcconnect/discussiongroups.html. Some of the questions and answers may have been edited for space, style, and clarity.

I was told that, at an AAMI conference, there was a discussion about data cables lying on or being supported by fire sprinkler pipe. Can you summarize that discussion?

Sprinkler support systems are designed to support the piping and extinguishing agent, with a safety factor of 150 pounds. However, NFPA 25-1998 clearly states at section 2-2.2 that "sprinkler piping shall not be subjected to external loads by materials either resting on the pipe or hung from the pipe." LS.02.01.35 EP 4 describes a restriction on sprinkler piping supporting anything: Piping for approved automatic sprinkler systems is not used to support any other item. For full text and exceptions refer to NFPA 25-1998, Section 2-2.2. While cables are not allowed, The Joint Commission realizes that an occasional light supply (such as light whip) may lean against an adjacent sprinkler pipe and not create an immediate threat. It is up to the organization to prioritize and correct improper use of the sprinkler piping system, including the Plan for Improvement found in the Statement of Conditions. It is important to note that individual state inspectors may have a different interpretation.

Our institution is addressing the Sentinel Event Alert on alarm safety. One of the strategies suggested is to assess whether the acoustics in patient care areas allow critical alarm signals to be audible. Can you provide guidelines on how to accomplish this?

This was an issue identified in the previous 2003/2004 National Patient Safety Goal—the inability of staff to hear the patient alarm. The solution then was to physically audit the care environment, working with nursing to adjust the alarm levels or create alternative notification systems. For some, this meant tying alarms into smartphones or pagers. For others, this was accomplished by interfacing with the units nurse call system. Include in the assessment the physical characteristics associated with the occupied space and related equipment.

Our system used to lease all IV pumps. The lease was purchased by a third-party vendor, and it now owns the pumps and is fully responsible for them. What is the system's responsibility for the pumps now if we have a TJC survey?

The Joint Commission does not accredit third-party vendors, so we require the accredited organization to be responsible for the work performed on equipment.

When will TJC include IT computers in patient care areas to the inventory list of equipment and equipment management program (PM)? IT computers are being purchased, and clinical applications are being placed on these computers. These same computers are being placed in patient care areas. We have seen fires associated with these computers, and the primary reason is the dust collected and heat generated. Patients are generally very close (within arm's length) to these computers, many of which will not pass electrical safety. Unfortunately, these computers are not included in TJC surveys, therefore, maintenance is not done.

There is no Joint Commission restriction that prohibits inclusion of computers into the medical equipment inventory. It appears you have identified an equipment risk in the patient care environment, so The Joint Commission would expect that you are managing that risk. ■