



## COLA PATIENT SAFETY PROGRAM 2009: SPECIMEN IDENTIFICATION

COLA began the COLA Patient Safety Program in 2008. This program focuses on areas in laboratory medicine that are found to have high error rates and significant impact on patient safety. COLA will identify an existing COLA criterion or create a new COLA criterion as the patient safety goal for each year, and provide education on good laboratory practices for implementation of that criterion. The program has been integrated into the COLA survey process.

The COLA Patient Safety Goal for 2009 is:

**PRE 17:** Are all specimens labeled with a unique patient identifier composed of 2 individual identifiers, and the source of the specimen (when appropriate)?

To contribute to the reduction of medical errors as a result of misidentification, it is necessary for laboratories to ensure that all specimens are labeled with unique identification that can be linked to the patient, the requisition, and the report. Using a combination of two identifiers increases the likelihood of catching misidentifications due to common or similar names. It is also important to include the source of the specimen on the label, when appropriate. For example, the source is obvious for collected tubes of blood, but a swab would need to be labeled as throat, wound, etc. to identify the source.

Proper patient identification (which was the Patient Safety Goal for 2008) followed by proper specimen labeling is an essential part of the testing process. Laboratories need to be aware of the emphasis in the medical community to reduce medical errors due to mislabeled specimens. A successful mechanism is to utilize at least two identifiers on the specimen and to carefully label the specimen immediately after collection. Do not pre-label collection tubes or specimen containers.

Appropriate identifiers include:

- Name
- Birth date
- Medical record number
- Social security number

Bar-coding technology is becoming quite sophisticated, and in some settings may be part of the specimen labeling system. While barcodes can create unique identification, there is still an opportunity for error if the barcode is not matched to the proper specimen. In this circumstance, using a second identifier beyond the barcode could help to prevent identification errors and subsequent specimen labeling errors.

Verify that the same identifiers are present on all of the following that are applicable:

- Requisition (order)
- Patient wristband
- Patient chart
- Barcodes
- Sample labels

Correct specimen identification across the path of workflow is critical. The specimen must retain its unique identification when transferred to other containers for testing. Test results performed on mislabeled specimens will be linked to the wrong patient, and may put the health of two patients at risk.

Think about this important patient safety goal, and take steps to ensure compliance in your laboratory.

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For information about COLA services or for technical inquiries, call our Information Resource Center at (800) 981-9883.