

2023 Gary J. Gefroh Safety and Health Award Winner: Lela Luper, BSN, RN, CIC, FAPIC, T-CHEST

The purpose of the Gary J. Gefroh Safety and Health Award is to recognize significant contributions by an individual or group resulting in improved healthcare safety and/or infection control conditions at an IHS and/or Tribal healthcare program. This award is sponsored by the IHS Division of Environmental Health and Engineering. The 2023 recipient of the Gary J. Gefroh Award is proudly presented to the Chickasaw Nation Department of Health's Lela Luper.

Ms. Luper serves as the Chickasaw Nation Department of Health (CNDH) Infection Prevention and Control (IPC) manager in Ada, OK. Lela has been an infection preventionist in the rural hospital and ambulatory care setting for over 22 years, providing her with the skills, critical thinking, and leadership abilities to promote infection prevention initiatives and patient safety. She has been board-certified in infection control since 2004 and was an inaugural member of the Association of Professionals in Infection Control and Epidemiology's (APIC) Fellow class. Lela has served APIC in various capacities, including her serving on the Board of Directors and the Nominating and Awards Committee. She also serves as a revision cycle and steering committee member at the Facility Guidelines Institute (FGI). Lela has been a major contributor to several special projects, including developing the APIC Roadmap for the Novice Infection Preventionist, the Association for Healthcare Environment text, and the APIC CIC Prep Course item writer. Ms. Luper provided an interview for the FGI - Between the Lines: Infection Control Risk Assessment and Infection Prevention and APIC 5-Second Rule podcast. She also presented an APIC webinar highlighting infection control concerns related to construction, renovation, demolition ICRA, with an FGI colleague. Most recently, in 2023, Lela had the opportunity to share at the 2023 APIC Annual Conference and the National Indian Health Board-OSAP IC Boot Camp CNDH's experiences with complying with Joint Commission accreditation standards surrounding low-level disinfection of noncritical items and standardizing instructions for use. Ms. Luper continues to encourage and mentor new infection preventionists entering the profession as faculty for APIC educational courses.

As our lead infection preventionist, Lela was an instrumental part of the HICS team during the recent COVID-19 pandemic. Often, working behind the scenes on investigations, applying and interpreting directives within our healthcare environment, and standardizing care delivery practices throughout the CNDH system of a 72 bed hospital and three satellite clinics. Even after the pandemic, Lela has remained a point of contact and resource for many of our employees due to the changes in practice that COVID-19 brought on. She has effectively created a policy to standardize patient care from "toes in to toes out" whether end of visit or discharge. She and her team continue to track COVID-19 illnesses among our employees and hospitalizations among our patients. COVID-19 created many opportunities for improvement for our system. One opportunity was implementing a patient screening questionnaire seeking information about any possible emerging infectious illness, including COVID-19. Over six months, Lela led a team in developing this patient screening, defining the responsibility for completing the screen and how often the screen needed to be completed for each patient. Our electronic medical record system now holds this screening, allowing all care delivery teams the chance to investigate and know before patient arrival onsite if they are experiencing any infectious illness symptoms. This knowledge provides proactive measures to be taken, such as patient placement, transmission-based precautions, and appropriate PPE use. A critical upcoming accreditation intervention will call upon

organizations to have a process in place to identify emerging infectious illnesses sooner rather than later. With Lela's leadership, we have gone from completing zero patient screens to, on average, over 3500 patient screening visits per week.

Besides routine surveillance activities to identify and reduce infections or improve hand hygiene compliance, Ms. Luper led the IPC team to successfully implement and report on indicators complementing our strategic plan, including the timely reporting and patient treatment of reportable diseases and conditions. The indicator was developed to reduce the time between lab results and reporting, and increased assurance that patients received adequate and correct treatment. As a result of this initiative, over 2,860 reports and patient treatment evaluations have been completed since 2022. In an effort to continue to increase access to and quality of the care provided at CNDH, we are constantly renovating space or constructing new facilities. We recognize the importance of having IPC at the table early during planning and design. To that end, Ms. Luper has participated in over 52 pre-construction infection control risk assessments in 2023, followed by preparing infection control permits for projects on our campus and at satellite locations. Lela also spends a significant time consulting and collaborating with our building team and Department of Commerce and Family Services partners through ongoing planning participation for Surgery Expansion, Complementary Medicine, Pediatrics, Empowered Living, and Strong Family building projects proactively seeking to reduce hazards because of design and construction.

Another example of Lela's work involved an IPC hierarchical focus on low-level disinfection following manufacturers' instructions for use from our accreditation partners which created an opportunity to work on an area of IPC risk. A long-standing problem generated by manufacturers for many organizations, Lela led and guided staff on how to clean and disinfect items that touch the intact patient skin. Ms. Luper was assigned by Executive Leadership to lead a workgroup to address low-level disinfection of noncritical patient care items, and produced a document to determine the method of cleaning the items, frequency of cleaning, assigned group responsibility, and the item manufacturer. A two-year project impacted by ongoing COVID activities, the initial capture of 900 noncritical items has been reduced to a master file list of 400-line items. This tool also identifies known conflicts between purchased noncritical patient care items and manufacturers' instructions for cleaning disinfection. The tool resides on the CNDH portal and is readily available to our employees and teams needing guidance. She maintains the tool she developed and evaluates on a regular basis to ensure long-term sustainability and use of this document.

Lela Luper fosters an environment of learning and seeks to help everyone regarding infection prevention and control practices on behalf of our patients. She is a leader and expert consultative resource in our organization and is well deserving of this award.