

EC

made easy

Your Key to Understanding the Environment of Care®

Fourth Edition



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Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic brought home the importance of the health care physical environment in helping to prevent the spread of infectious disease, whether through room air pressure differentials, plexiglass sneeze-guard barriers, or furniture arrangements that foster social distancing. At the same time, rising workplace violence in health care settings has led to additional security cameras, access control measures, and devices such as panic buttons for staff. Security has become a key area for concern within the *environment of care*[®], another term for the health care physical environment.

Indeed, an appropriately designed and managed environment of care is crucial to providing safe, reliable, high-quality care, treatment, and services—not just in hospitals but across all settings, from ambulatory surgery centers to behavioral health care and human services facilities to nursing care centers and assisted living communities. The concept is certainly broad, covering everything from automatic sprinkler systems to eyewash stations to emergency power supply switches. But the environment of care is also very specific, with detailed technical and procedural requirements. Getting your head around all the details can be a challenge. We want to make the undertaking easier for you with this freshly updated fourth edition, which includes a variety of new downloadable tools and more robust sections on health care worker safety, security, fire safety, and construction.



THE JOINT COMMISSION

The Joint Commission accredits and certifies more than 22,000 health care organizations and programs in the United States. Joint Commission accreditation and certification are recognized nationwide as a symbol of quality that reflects your organization's commitment to meeting certain performance standards.

This new edition also clarifies the Joint Commission survey process related to the environment of care. As they tour facilities, Joint Commission *Life Safety Code*^{®*} surveyors pay closest attention to those commonly cited physical environment deficiencies most likely to cause harm (such as fire doors propped open for convenience, cables draped over or attached to sprinkler pipes, and failure to maintain eyewash stations and drench showers in spaces where workers handle corrosive chemicals). But clinical surveyors, who evaluate patient care, also ask questions about the physical environment when they conduct tracers. A tracer is a tool used by surveyors to analyze an organization's systems by following or "tracing" an individual patient through the care process. Tracer methodology, however, isn't just limited to following patients. Tracer methodology can also be used to evaluate quality and safety on a broader scale by following an organization's processes, operations, and systems and the impact these have on patients, staff, and visitors. The Joint Commission's goal in surveying the physical environment is to make a meaningful assessment, identify unknown risks, and help health care organizations (HCOs) provide the ideal environment for delivering care—under normal conditions and during disruptive circumstances such as power outages and construction or renovation projects.

This Book Is for You

This book is aimed at four major audiences: accreditation professionals, facility safety professionals, new facilities directors, and leadership at various levels.

You're an accreditation professional: You're charged with overseeing overall Joint Commission compliance. You're good with understanding the standards related to clinical areas; after all, you most likely came from a clinical background. But the complexities of the health care physical environment can be confusing. This book explains complicated environment of care concepts in plain English. It supports you in your role of dealing with challenging standards addressed in the "Environment of Care" (EC) chapter of The Joint Commission's *Comprehensive Accreditation Manual* for your organization's accreditation program or its E-dition[®] counterpart.

**Life Safety Code*[®] is a registered trademark of the National Fire Protection Association, Quincy, MA.

You're a facility safety professional: You maintain a safe environment in your HCO by assessing potential risks and evaluating and implementing preventive measures. This book

helps you better understand compliance to reinforce your health care organization's ability to provide a safe environment for patients, visitors, and staff. This information is certainly not new to you, but everyone can always use a refresher and/or get clarification and updates on particularly challenging compliance areas.

You're a new facilities director: Maybe you attained this position because you excelled in some related position in your organization—you were a staff electrician, clinical engineer, or security officer. Or maybe you moved up through the environment of care ranks in your organization, and now you're in charge of the whole operation. In that case, you may know at least some of the Joint Commission compliance-related issues. Or maybe you came from another industry, so you might know how regulatory compliance works in that industry. This book helps you make sense of compliance in your HCO. That will help put you in a better position to facilitate safe and effective care and welcome Joint Commission surveyors who check to see that you do.

You're in a leadership position: Your facilities director is telling you that the building needs a new boiler and that the last possible patches have been made to the one you have. But it will cost big bucks to purchase a new one. How can you make sure that you provide the resources that are truly needed—as opposed to those that are merely wanted? How can you make sure you understand that situation and myriad others like it? Or maybe you're a leader on the front line and you just don't know what's expected of you regarding fire drills, workplace violence, or the intersection of infection prevention and control and the environment of care. This book gives you the background to prepare for and understand conversations with your facilities staff and accreditation professionals. It gives you confidence in the decisions you need to make regarding your physical facilities and clinical protocols.

You're working together: Not only is this book for all of you to use independently, but it is also for all of you to use together to communicate and collaborate better in your efforts to devise appropriate and effective accreditation compliance strategies.

- **Accreditation professionals:** You can sit down with experienced facilities directors to go over concepts in the book and enhance your mutual understanding of those concepts. You can use the book to translate environment of care and

emergency management information for clinicians and leadership.

- **Facility safety professionals:** You can use the book to help identify and manage risks related to the physical environment. It also will help you to refresh your knowledge and get clarifications and updates on various compliance challenges.
- **New facilities directors:** You can use the book to learn environment of care concepts and then communicate those to accreditation professionals or leadership.
- **Leaders:** You can use the book to prime yourself for any and all discussions about the environment of care with accreditation or facilities staff. You'll learn the lingo and understand the concepts so important to providing high-quality health care in a safe environment.

This Book Is for All Settings

You may be addressing air quality issues in a hospital surgical suite, suicide prevention in a community behavioral health care center, hazmat spills in an ambulatory clinic, workplace violence in a nursing care center, or safe oxygen use in a patient's home. What you'll find as you read this book is that many Joint Commission standards related to the physical environment are very similar across the setting spectrum.

This Book Focuses on the Basics

Whichever role you fill in whatever setting, you all need the same thing: a clear, easy-to-grasp guide to the basics. This book is it. What follows is an introduction to the fundamental concepts of the environment of care.

Basic elements: The environment of care is made up of three basic elements that interact to create risk:

- **The physical space:** This includes the building structure, the required design interior elements, and the arrangement of the space.
- **The equipment and utilities:** These include equipment and utilities that support patient care as well as the operation of the building.
- **The people:** This includes all who enter the environment—including patients or individuals served, staff, vendors, and visitors. (In this book, contract workers and licensed practitioners are included in any mention of staff.)

Environment of Care (EC) standards: The standards in the EC chapter cover the following functional areas of the environment of care:

- **Safety:** This area addresses risks usually related to accidental incidents that occur during everyday tasks, in the physical structure, or due to uncontrollable factors such as weather. It also includes worker safety and maintaining a healthful environment—one that is smoke free, well lit, and noise controlled.
- **Security:** This area addresses risks related to incidents that are often intentional and result in harm or loss to people and property (workplace violence, abductions, and theft, for example). Access control is, consequently, a big part of security. But “hardening” the perimeter of a hospital, for example, must be accomplished without compromising patient access to care.
- **Hazardous materials and waste:** To be compliant, you have to manage hazardous materials and waste from the time they enter the facility to the time they leave it. This highly regulated area is all about managing the many risks involved in all the processes for acquiring, handling, and disposing of these materials. Reducing harmful emissions such as from volatile anesthetics and the burning of fossil fuels should be a priority for all HCOs. In fact, reducing health care’s carbon footprint is one of The Joint Commission’s strategic initiatives.
- **Fire safety:** Fire protection is about preventing injury to life and/or property damage as a result of smoke, fire, and products of combustion. In the EC chapter, fire safety standards relate to efforts involving human intervention, such as fire drills and the testing and use of fire safety equipment. Fire safety is also addressed in the “Life Safety” (LS) chapter, which is based on the National Fire Protection Association (NFPA) *Life Safety Code* (NFPA 101-2012). This fourth edition does not cover the LS chapter in detail, except for requirements that are integrally related to EC chapter requirements. (See the appendix, “Resources,” for Joint Commission Resources [JCR] resources on LS standards.)
- **Medical equipment:** This area addresses risks related to equipment used in monitoring, treatment, diagnosis, or direct care of patients. Inventory management as well as inspection, testing, and maintenance (ITM) are the primary activities involved in managing these risks.
- **Utilities:** Risks in this area include (but aren’t limited to) those related to water management; electrical distribution;

emergency power; vertical and horizontal transport; heating, ventilation, and air-conditioning (HVAC) systems; boiler and steam systems; piped medical gas; vacuum systems; and communication systems. As with medical equipment, inventory management and ITM activities are the main responsibilities in this realm.

Book Organization and Format

You're busy, so this book is set up in a way that makes it easy to quickly find the information you need. Content is clearly labeled and consistently formatted, with core and extra features identified for targeted reading.

This book is organized into 10 chapters:

- **Chapter 1:** Who's Who in the EC?
- **Chapter 2:** What's What in the EC?
- **Chapter 3:** Safety
- **Chapter 4:** Security
- **Chapter 5:** Hazardous Materials and Waste
- **Chapter 6:** Medical Equipment
- **Chapter 7:** Utility Systems
- **Chapter 8:** Fire and Life Safety
- **Chapter 9:** Construction
- **Chapter 10:** The EC Survey

Chapter features: Each chapter includes many of the same features, so navigation is easy. These chapter features are listed in the table below.

Chapter Feature	Purpose of Feature
Key Concepts	Highlights key ideas
The Manual	Lists the relevant <i>Comprehensive Accreditation Manual</i> or E-dition chapters
In Other Words	Defines key terms in plain language
Relevant Standard(s) or Relevant Standard and EP	Lists pertinent standards for each chapter in this book and sometimes key elements of performance as well. The highlighted standards apply to every accreditation program unless otherwise indicated.
Collaboration	Explains how leaders, accreditation professionals, facilities directors, and other staff can work together

Smart Questions	Intended to stimulate reflection and focused conversation on environment of care subjects
Myth Busters	Clarifies common misconceptions about the health care physical environment
Picture THIS	Highlights topics visually
Try This Tool	Calls attention to a pertinent downloadable tool and explains how it can be used

Notes on the New Edition

The fourth edition of *EC Made Easy* has been updated to reflect changes affecting environment of care and compliance issues, including the following:

- As of January 1, 2023, The Joint Commission references the 2022 Facility Guidelines Institute (FGI) *Guidelines for Design and Construction of Hospitals* for accredited hospital (HAP), critical access hospital (CAH), and laboratory (LAB) programs; *Guidelines for Design and Construction of Outpatient Facilities* for accredited ambulatory health care (AHC) and office-based surgery (OBS) programs; and *Guidelines for Design and Construction of Residential Health, Care, and Support Facilities* for accredited nursing care center (NCC), assisted living community (ALC) and residential behavioral health care and human services (BHC) programs. Some of the changes are discussed in [Chapter 9](#), “Construction,” of this edition of *EC Made Easy*.
- On January 1, 2022, a new water management standard—EC.02.05.02—took effect for Joint Commission–accredited hospitals, critical access hospitals, and nursing care centers. This standard, which includes four elements of performance (EPs), provides more robust guidance for controlling *Legionella* and other opportunistic waterborne pathogens. See [Chapter 7](#), “Utility Systems,” for additional information.
- Several new Joint Commission requirements regarding workplace violence prevention went into effect January 1, 2022. In this book, [Chapter 4](#), “Security,” discusses those requirements affecting the environment of care.
- In the past three years, Joint Commission surveyors have been focusing more on fire safety issues in health care facility kitchens, the number one location and origin point for HCO fires. This topic is addressed in [Chapter 8](#), “Fire and Life Safety.”

Emergency management and life safety details not addressed

in this edition: Previous editions of *EC Made Easy* included in depth coverage of the “Emergency Management” and “Life Safety” chapters of the *Comprehensive Accreditation Manual* and E-edition. This fourth edition does not provide detailed coverage of the requirements in those chapters for a number of reasons:

In 2022, JCR published *Emergency Management in Health Care: An All-Hazards Approach*, Fifth Edition, which addresses The Joint Commission’s new “Emergency Management” chapter for hospitals and other facets of emergency preparedness and response in depth. Coverage of this complex, evolving topic is better served in that publication. As mentioned earlier, this edition of *EC Made Easy* also does not go into detail regarding The Joint Commission’s “Life Safety” chapter and the NFPA’s *Life Safety Code*. In 2020, JCR published the new book *Life Safety Made Easy: Your Key to Understanding Fire Safety in Health Care Facilities*, a comprehensive look at the LS standards. See the appendix, “Resources,” for information on these and other JCR publications.