Nearly 59 percent of sentinel events since 2004 have resulted in patient deaths, according to recently updated sentinel event statistics from the Joint Commission. The updated statistics include 2014 summary data for Jan. 1 through June 30.

A sentinel event is an unexpected occurrence involving death or serious physical or psychological injury, or the risk thereof, including any process variation for which a recurrence would carry a significant chance of a serious adverse outcome. Data from the 8,275 incidents reviewed from 2004 through the first half of 2014 show a total of 8,495 patients have been affected by these events, with 58.7 percent resulting in the patient’s death, 9.4 percent resulting in loss of function and 31.9 percent resulting in unexpected additional care and/or psychological impact. The Joint Commission reviewed a total of 394 sentinel events during the first half of 2014.

The Joint Commission learns of sentinel events either voluntarily from accredited organizations, or through other mechanisms such as the complaint process or media coverage. It is estimated that fewer than 2 percent of all sentinel events are reported to the Joint Commission and that only about two-thirds of these are voluntarily reported by the organization. As these data are not an epidemiologic data set, no conclusions should be drawn about the actual relative frequency of events or trends in events over time.

The Joint Commission Sentinel Event database is designed to increase the general knowledge about sentinel events, their contributing factors, and strategies for prevention. For more information, visit the Joint Commission sentinel event Web page.