The Role of Nurses in Improving Hospital Quality and Efficiency: Real-World Results

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Abstract

Discussions of hospital quality, efficiency, and nursing care often taken place independent of one another. Activities to assure the adequacy and performance of hospital nursing, improve quality, and achieve effective control of hospital costs need to be harmonized. Nurses are critical to the delivery of high-quality, efficient care. Lessons from Magnet program hospitals and hospitals implementing front-line staff–driven performance improvement programs such as Transforming Care at the Bedside illustrate how nurses and staff, supported by leadership, can be actively involved in improving both the quality and the efficiency of hospital care.

Nurses have key roles to play as hospitals continue their quest for higher quality and better patient safety.

The u.s. hospital system suffers from shortfalls in quality and from unsustainable growth in costs. The 2000 Institute of Medicine (IOM) report To Err Is Human documented major weaknesses in the quality in hospital and ambulatory settings; the 2001 follow-up report, Crossing the Quality Chasm, laid out a vision of a health system that delivered safe, reliable, timely, and patient-centered care. Improving the quality of America’s hospitals has become a highly visible public and private enterprise, as payers, accreditors, and private organizations attempt to set standards and encourage their achievement.

At the same time, there has been ongoing concern about controlling hospital costs, which have experienced real growth of approximately 2 percent per year despite decades of efforts at hospital payment reform and utilization control. Efforts by hospitals to control labor costs have had major effects on nurses—the largest component of hospital labor. Lower rates of entry into the nurse workforce in the 1990s, and the impact on long-term shortages of nurses, have been attributed in part to the perceptions by potential nurses that the quality of work life as a nurse was low.

Discussions of hospital quality, cost control, and hospital nursing care have often taken place independent of one another. These discussions need to be integrated, and the goals of
assuring the adequacy and performance of hospital nursing, improving quality, and achieving effective cost control need to be harmonized. In this paper we argue, first, that the staffing and organization of hospital nursing affects both quality and cost; second, that nurses must be actively involved in process improvement directed at both quality and efficiency; and third, that there are emerging models of how such engagement can be obtained from both the hospital-level leadership and the front-line staff.