Bridging the Communication Gap Through Implementation of a Patient Navigator Program

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Abstract
All healthcare providers working in an acute setting need to be empowered to provide an optimal patient experience with quality outcomes. The Hospital Consumer Assessment of Healthcare Providers and Systems (HCAHPS) survey is a national standardized survey instrument designed to assess the patient's perspective of hospital care for public reporting purposes. These results are posted on the Center for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS) website for consumers to access comparison data related to a hospital's performance, create new incentives for hospitals to improve quality outcomes and enhance accountability through transparency (1). HCAHPS has 10 measures that evaluate the patient's recent hospital experience. Six of these are summary measures. One key measure, "communication with nurses," can directly affect both the patient satisfaction and patient safety scores (2). Patients tend to rate this domain based on the caregivers, and this rating can have a financial impact upon the institution. The skills and art associated with service are neither innate nor automatic. Communication skills are acquired and refined only through practice. The Magnet recognition program was developed to recognize health care organizations that provide nursing excellence and a vehicle for disseminating successful nursing practices and strategies (3). To assist the nurse in the patient's perception to care, a Patient Navigator program was developed to provide patients with the best possible hospital experience. The Patient Navigator program compliments the direct patient care that is provided on the patient care unit.

HCAHPS is a national standardized survey instrument designed to assess the patients' perspective of hospital care for public reporting purposes. There are a total of 27 survey items that are divided into six composite measures, two individual items and two global ratings. The six summary measures and two global ratings are listed below.

Summary Measures
Communication with nurses
Communication with physicians
Responsiveness of hospital staff to patient's needs
Cleanliness and quiet of the physical environment
Hospital staff managed patient pain
Discharge information
Communication about medicines

Global Ratings
Overall rating of the hospital
Whether the patients would recommend the hospital

Communication with nurses from the patient perspective assigns value to the patient's perception of the care delivered. When the patient feels that they are given information concerning their care, it validates to them the nurse is knowledgeable and competent (4). We do not consider the patient's psychological needs when we communicate to the patient as we are so focused on communicating the tasks we must complete to aid in the patient's ability to achieve their goal of health. Our task oriented approach to communication may also mean that we rarely examine how we're communicating. (5). The main dissatisfiers cited by nurses and patients include the perception of staff shortage and feeling as if the nurses are under pressure to complete tasks as being the main dissatisfier with the care they receive. Although our organization has implemented programs such as hourly patient rounding, utilization of volunteers to meet patient's basic person needs, and staff accountability for outcomes related to patient satisfaction we continue to struggle to meet a high touch component that could move the scores from achieving the national benchmarks to exceeding the

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national benchmarks. Hardwiring the skill and art associated with service needed to be evident across the organization in order to be the provider of choice for not only medical care but patient satisfaction as well.

One of the primary responsibilities of a nurse is to advocate and facilitate communication between the patient, family and the healthcare team to develop a plan of care to achieve mutually agreed upon outcomes. Our nurses work in a demanding clinical environment where it is not always feasible for the nurse to meet the special needs of the patients and families, especially those that require extensive amounts of time for service recovery or accessing other departmental resources. Interdisciplinary collaboration is one of the ways we strengthen the hospital experience for the patient and their family.

Although it is an expectation that nurses perform service recovery related to a patient's issue or concern, the Patient Relations (PR) staff is an invaluable resource to further enhance service recovery for our patients and their families. Among their many roles, the PR staff members are available to meet with the patient and their families and/or caregivers to evaluate and provide for any needs they may have during their hospital stay. Although well versed in patient satisfaction stratagems and problem resolution experience, the realization is that the PR staff may not always be readily available to conduct formal, high touch greetings on behalf of the care provider staff. The Patient Navigator program increases the visibility of PR staff and services extended from the PR office, resulting in more positive patient visits. The strength, efficacy and presence of five PR staff members is multiplied and magnified by the infusion of Patient Navigators, whose purpose is also to further promote positive patient experiences, however through different methods of rounding and patient interaction. An additional benefit of the implementation of a Patient Navigator program includes reinforcement of effective communication across multi-disciplines and relationship building concepts. This is most evident in the increased team effort among direct care provider staff, ancillary teams and quality improvement specialists who work collaboratively with Patient Navigators and share common PR goals in the organizational quest to deliver the perfect patient experience. Ultimately, serving as an extension of our PR experts Patient Navigators help us to facilitate a more inclusive and supportive environment for patients, loved ones and staff.

The multi-fold goals of the Patient Navigator program at UPMC Shadyside include the following:

- Increase patient satisfaction
- Decrease the number of patient complaints and grievances
- Increase likelihood of repeat patient visits based on experience outcomes
- Attract new patients as a result of our ability, through additional resources, to implement and sustain value-added strategies
- Increase employee satisfaction through partnership strengthening

The role of the Patient Navigator is to help disseminate important information that may prove useful to the patient and their loved ones, the contents of which can ultimately impact patient satisfaction outcomes. A script was developed in an effort to effectively convey stay-related information, based on this HCAHPS and Press Ganey feedback. Armed with a leave-behind tool in the form of a tent card, Patient Navigators serve as patient educators, formal greeters and work as an extension of PR in an effort to help assess patient satisfaction, alert PR staff of any potential problems and help to avert formal complaints. They also conduct wellness visits to determine the quality of the patient’s stay and assist the care provider staff with the performance of some non-clinical functions such as filling and delivering water pitchers.

Although the notion of a Patient Navigator program made sound business sense, the initial challenge was to determine how best to recruit volunteers to serve in this capacity. UPMC Shadyside Hospital embraces community spirit, support and partnership. With this in mind, local universities and colleges were advised to determine how best to recruit volunteers to serve in this capacity. UPMC Shadyside Hospital expresses community spirit, support and partnership. With this in mind, local universities and colleges were advised of the volunteer opportunity. Interest in serving as a Patient Navigator was outstanding, most notably the response level of University of Pittsburgh (Pitt) students. Within a six month period, approximately 150 Pitt students signed on to participate as Patient Navigators at our facility. Although student academic backgrounds varied, most were on a pre-med or nursing curriculum track. Andrea Abt, Health Professions Consultant with the University of Pittsburgh, expresses satisfaction with the new alliance and shares the following, "The University of Pittsburgh truly appreciates our partnership with UPMC Shadyside Hospital. I have received overwhelmingly positive feedback from my advisees who participated in the Patient Navigator Program. The students enjoy their patient interactions and feel they are making a difference as they convey pertinent information related to the hospital routine." Sandra Rader, UPMC Shadyside Vice President of Patient Care Services and Chief Nursing Officer concurs, "Our goal is to always create that exceptional experience. Partnering with
volunteers provided us the resources to offer frequent touch points for our patients. It also is a wonderful community benefit. Our partnership with the University of Pittsburgh enables us to assist in molding the health care workers of the future. This program has been a win-win for all involved.” Nicholas Thomas, Patient Navigator and med school candidate, echoes Rader’s remarks, “The patient navigator experience at UPMC Shadyside has benefited me in that I have learned to interact with patients on a personal level. Often times the interactions with patients, which stem from circulating out information about the hospital and its services, develop into casual conversations that have given me insight into how patients truly wish to be treated in the hospital setting.” Since the program’s inception, the majority of the Patient Navigator volunteers are students from local colleges and universities; however, volunteers from various backgrounds, careers and interests have participated as well. Examples include a lawyer, retired nurse and a physician’s spouse.

Four survey items were selected, two each from Press Ganey Inpatient Measures and HCAHPS, to measure the benefits of the Patient Navigator Program. These benchmark indicators demonstrate a sustained improvement in the how patients and visitors’ perception of their experiences while at our facility. Additionally, scripting and training, outlined visit objectives to be achieved, and accountability reporting related to the Patient Navigator rounding process have resulted in above national average volunteer retention rates and volunteer satisfaction. Since its inception, we have experienced a decline in patient complaints and grievances. Patient Navigators remain instrumental as “an extra set of eyes and ears,” working again as an extension of care providers and PR staff. As a result of their efforts, extra attention and visits, Patient Navigators have alerted staff to stay-related dissatisfaction which has provided us with an opportunity to immediately react to any potential concerns. Implementation of the program has yielded additional and unexpected benefits. For example, Patient Navigators have also served as a resource pool for nursing assistant candidates. Andrew Thomas, Unit Director, UPMC Shadyside, reports that, “I have been very pleased with the role of the Patient Navigator. It has complimented the staff role in welcoming and assisting patients. The individuals are bright and consistently pleasant in their interactions with patients and staff. Because of these demonstrated behaviors, I hired one of the navigators and look forward to the opportunity of potentially employing others as well.” Preliminary review of this type of recruitment may have a far reaching impact as the Patient Navigators are keenly aware of the nursing assistant functions and, as pre-med or nursing students, have a vested and personal interest in obtaining a health care position that may further contribute to their career success thus decreasing the likelihood of attrition.

Nurses at UPMC Shadyside act interdependently and independently when making judgments and initiating protocols, policies, procedures, and guidelines to effectively resolve patient care issues. Independent nursing judgment is evident, expected, and valued. As part of our Magnet® journey, reviewing Exemplary Practice, which is one of the components of the American Nurse Credentialing Center’s (ANCC) new Magnet model® we recognized engaging as many people as possible in the care of the patient would yield a better patient outcome (6). Jill Ireland, Unit Director, UPMC Shadyside, reflects and further shares, “The (Patient Navigator) volunteers add a unique perspective to the patient experience. The volunteer’s work is completely centered and focused on the patients without any other motivation. It is truly the purest example of patient centered care that we are privileged to have at Shadyside.” Barbara King, Director of Nursing Support Services, UPMC Shadyside, reports that, “building relationships between healthcare organizations and patients/families is critical in every point of the patient’s journey to wellness. Our Patient Navigators fortify the foundation of a trusting and transparent relationship. In our experience, that has been good “medicine” for all.” UPMC Shadyside achieved Magnet® status in March 2010 through the collaborative efforts of staff, volunteers, and community support. Although not directly responsible for achieving designation, the patient navigator program was a resource that supported the nurses in order for them to provide care to our patients and provided evidence of innovation with the development and implementation of the program.

References


http://www.cms.gov/HospitalQualityInits/30_HospitalHCAHPS.asp

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