

Recommendation 1

Hospital leaders should ensure that assessments of the health needs and resources in their community include specific attention to behavioral illness.

Psychiatric Emergency Department Provides More Timely, Appropriate Care

Howard County General Hospital, Columbia, MD

Summary

In 2007, Howard County General Hospital (HCGH) established a psychiatric emergency unit within its emergency department (ED) to ensure that patients presenting with mental health issues would receive treatment in a timely manner and in a more appropriate setting. The hospital has the only ED in the County and some 76,000 patients were evaluated and treated in its ED during 2006. Over the previous two years, the hospital had noted an increase in the number of ED patients (approximately 4 percent) requiring a psychiatric evaluation. Hospital leaders created the psychiatric emergency unit to provide those seeking treatment for mental health issues with a higher quality experience in a more compassionate atmosphere.

Community and Hospital

Howard County is located in central Maryland between Baltimore and Washington, D.C. In 2006, the estimated population of Howard County was 269,371, the median household income was \$94,260, and 3.2 percent of Howard County's families live below the Federal Poverty Level.

Howard County General Hospital is a 208-bed comprehensive, acute-care medical center. When the hospital first opened in 1973, it was a 59-bed short-stay facility intended for members of the Columbia Medical Plan. However, in response to the immediate demand for services and rapid growth in the County, the hospital was incorporated the following year as Howard County General Hospital, an independent not-for-profit hospital with a mission to provide high-quality, comprehensive care to its community. Today, the hospital provides a wide range of specialty services, including a 20-bed (voluntary and in-voluntary) inpatient psychiatric unit for adults and adolescents ages 12 and over.

In 1998, the hospital entered into a strategic partnership with Johns Hopkins Health System, thus augmenting the community-focused, integrated delivery system already in place with the benefits of a formal connection with a major academic medical center.

Program Overview

From 2002 to 2004, HCGH noticed a significant increase in patients seeking treatment for behavioral health care issues through the emergency department. These patients tended to have serious mental problems and were staying for prolonged periods of time. The hospital believed that it could provide a higher quality experience for these patients in a more appropriate, private and secure environment.

Patients seeking behavioral health care services in the ED tended to have serious chronic conditions, characterized by recurring episodes. Since the hospital had an inpatient psychiatric unit, it had appropriate staff (board-certified physicians and specialized psychiatric staff) to triage,

evaluate and treat ED patients for mental health issues. Nevertheless, these patients often became more distressed waiting for care while staff attended to patients with seemingly more urgent medical conditions (heart attack or asthma attack), thus exacerbating the patients' condition. In the traditional ED, patients that became increasingly impatient would sometimes leave without being treated. Hospital leaders wanted to provide a higher quality experience to this population and decided to create a psychiatric emergency unit.

A design group was organized to plan the physical space for this new unit. It was comprised of hospital architects, psychiatrists, and nurses that visited hospitals with psychiatric emergency departments to evaluate what worked best. The design group decided that the psychiatric emergency unit should be part of the ED, where all patients are first evaluated to determine if there is an existing medical issue. Thus, if necessary, medical problems are managed before patients are transferred to the psychiatric emergency unit. Patients in need of medical detoxification may be treated in the ED or admitted to a medical unit within the hospital for the acute phase of their care.

The psychiatric emergency unit, which opened in February 2007, is comprised of eight treatment sites in a private, secure area. Three rooms are set up to provide seclusion and restraints for patients when necessary. Five treatment cubicles feature recliners rather than beds so that patients may relax, but not get too comfortable. The cubicles are intended to emulate a wellness environment rather than an inpatient facility. They provide a quiet, calming and soothing place for patients, but don't give them the impression that they are there to stay. The length of time patients remain in the psychiatric emergency unit depends on their diagnosis and the treatment necessary, but it can be from 20 to 30 hours if a patient needs to be transferred to another psychiatric facility. The psychiatric emergency unit generally cares for four patients at any given time, but there have been as many as eight. The environment is intended to help patients deal with their crisis, alleviate symptoms, and return to normal functioning.

The psychiatric emergency unit is staffed 24 hours a day, 7 days a week with a nurse, a patient care technician, and a security officer. All staff that work in the unit have received additional education in the care and treatment of psychiatric patients and in de-escalation techniques. During the day, a psychiatrist is available to evaluate patients. In the evening, psychiatric triage is performed by an on-call licensed clinical social worker, who consults with an on-call psychiatrist. In staffing the unit, the hospital sought compassionate individuals that were experienced in working with patients with behavioral health issues. They attracted nurses with psychiatric experience that wanted to work in an emergency department as well as nurses with emergency experience that wanted to work with psychiatric patients.

Program Impact

Having a dedicated psychiatric unit within the ED ensures that patients have a private, relaxing place to stay while they are being treated and stabilized. Feedback on this unit, from family members and from the local chapter of the National Alliance for Mental Illness, has been positive. The hospital clinical and administrative professional staff have also reported increased professional and personal satisfaction since the psychiatric emergency department opened, as it addressed their patient safety concerns and enabled staff to provide more focused care in both the ED and the psychiatric emergency unit.

Funding

In order to provide appropriate space for the psychiatric emergency unit, HCGH opened a pod within the ED. Funding came from HCGH, a grant from the Horizon Foundation, and state funds. HCGH contributed \$275,000 and the Horizon Foundation provided a \$100,000 grant. Through the state hospital association's bond program, the hospital secured a matching grant of \$325,000 from the state. HCGH, as well as other agencies within the county, has an ongoing relationship

with Horizon Foundation whereby they seek to identify and address the County's most compelling health care services needs.

It is anticipated that the cost of providing emergency care will be covered through traditional payment sources such as commercial insurance, Medicare, and Medicaid. If patients do not have coverage, the hospital's patient accounts staff helps individuals determine if they are eligible for medical assistance and helps them apply for assistance.

Obstacles and Challenges

There were some challenges in terms of meeting the timeframe for applications for funding, but there were no major obstacles. The HCGH leadership has, historically, been responsive to the dynamic needs of the community. Howard County was on *Money* magazine's list of "100 Best Places to Live" and is a past recipient of an "All American City Award," which recognizes communities whose citizens work to identify and tackle community-wide challenges. When the need for outpatient mental health care services became increasingly apparent, the hospital leadership responded.

Success Factors

More than 1,000 patients have been treated in the psychiatric emergency department since it opened. It has avoided unnecessary psychiatric admissions, but more importantly, it has allowed the hospital to provide a safer, more focused environment for this population.

Lessons Learned and Advice to Others

It has been a worthwhile experience and Howard County General Hospital leaders would recommend that other hospitals consider opening a psychiatric emergency department.

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