



Nemaha County Hospital – Auburn, NE

Physician Extender Emergency Room Hospitalist (PEERist) Program

Overview

Nemaha County Hospital is a 20-bed county-owned hospital in Auburn, Neb. The town is served by the five physicians comprising the Auburn Family Health Center, located across the street from the hospital. In addition to being family practitioners, the physicians were covering the emergency department (ED), seeing patients in clinic, and following up on hospitalized patients. For rural physicians, the demands of being on primary ED call include being called in while seeing patients at the clinic and being called in at all hours of the night. This burden can lead to fatigue, burnout, and early retirement.

To address these issues, Gary Ensz, MD, a partner in the health center, came up with the idea of using physician assistants to cover the ED. He approached Nemaha County's chief executive officer with the idea, and they formed a work team with Nemaha's chief nursing officer/chief operating officer to implement the initiative. Auburn Family physicians developed protocols for the PAs, and Nemaha's CEO and CNO reviewed and approved them. In March 2008, the Physician Extender Emergency Room Hospitalist (PEERist) program kicked off, with three PAs covering the ED.

PEERists work under protocols addressing treatment concerns and give guidance on when physicians should be called. On-call doctors round with the PA in the morning before the clinic opens and thus do not have to leave the clinic during patient appointments. The PAs, who are employed by the physician practice, work a rotating schedule of up to 72 hours with as many as nine days off in a row. They are able to handle about 80 percent of the emergency cases and have time to serve in a hospitalist capacity. A physician is always available to respond to an emergency call within 20 minutes.

Impact

With highly trained PAs devoted exclusively to the hospital, ED patients are receiving faster, more appropriate care and are better informed. Immediate response teams are now available and can interact with patients more quickly. ED patients and inpatients are provided care by less-stressed, well-rested physicians. Inappropriate admissions have been reduced, as have ED visits by "frequent flyers." With PAs serving as hospitalists, inpatient care has improved as well.

Physicians now have more time and energy to work on quality initiatives, serve on committees, and advise/assist nurses. As a result, physician/hospital and physician/nurse relations have improved. Physician retention has increased, and the program will undoubtedly be appealing to prospective physicians during recruitment efforts.

Finally, a major benefit of the program is that the hospital now has 24/7 in-house coverage, a rarity in small rural hospitals.

Challenges/success factors

Hiring experienced PAs was crucial to effectively launching the PEERist program, as PAs have to be able to make decisions and work somewhat independently. From a technology perspective, the hospital's electronic medical record system has contributed to streamlined care processes. In addition, the PAs have been the biggest champions of computerized physician order entry.

Future direction/sustainability

Nemaha County Hospital just signed its second three-year agreement with Auburn Family Health Center. The agreement includes a more clearly defined hospitalist role for the PAs, as this role was established during the first year of the contract. The PAs have also started assisting with outpatient testing.

Advice to others

For reimbursement purposes, consult with your accounting firm to understand how a program like this affects your cost reporting. The program will cost a little more money but is well worth the benefits of improved patient care and safety, physician recruitment and retention, and physician relations.

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