Bridging the Gap: Development of the Inpatient Surgical Liaison Nurse Role

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Purpose: Implement a Surgical Liaison Nurse (SLN) role to promote communication between surgical residents and staff nurses on medical-surgical units in an academic hospital.

Background/Significance: In response to a need to expand surgical bed capacity throughout the medical-surgical nursing section and improve patient outcomes as reflected by our National Surgical Quality Improvement Program (NSQIP) data, the SLN position was established. Expanding surgical bed capacity meant nurses caring for new patient populations and acquiring additional skills. A nurse champion was critical for promoting practice changes to improve patient outcomes. The SLN role was created to provide a resource for staff nurses caring for surgical patients, role-model and promote practice changes, improve patient care coordination, and enhance communication between nurses, surgeons and patients.

Description: An experienced staff nurse was selected for this role. Key components of the role include daily patient rounds with the surgical team; helping communicate the plan of care to the primary nurse; conducting secondary rounds independently to ensure the care plan is followed; providing specific post-surgical teaching with patients; supporting staff through task assistance; providing “just-in-time” training as well as formal training for the healthcare team; and interacting with other hospital departments to ensure access to supplies, clinical expertise, resources, and patient care coordination. As a liaison, fostering communication and collegiality between staff members was critical, and accomplished through working closely with residents and nursing staff to identify patient safety concerns, education needs, and communication challenges.

Evaluation and Outcomes: The SLN has been instrumental in the implementation of an evidence-based post-surgical protocol to improve patient outcomes. Over the last 12 months since implementation of the SLN role, NSQIP reports have demonstrated a decrease in surgical site infection and post-operative pneumonia rates. Additionally, the Tricare Inpatient Satisfaction Survey, which measures beneficiary satisfaction with their inpatient experience, revealed a significant rise in satisfaction with healthcare team communication.

Conclusions: Implementation of the SLN role has promoted quality care of post-surgical patients and enhanced communication between physicians and nurses resulting in improved patient outcomes.

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