

Time Tactics for Nurses

NEW HYDE PARK -- Nurses are highly skilled, used to multitasking and strive to take the best possible care of their patients. Most nurses will tell you though, that they spend far too much time on documentation, walking the hallways to find supplies, waiting for lab results, and visiting the central nursing station to coordinate care as opposed to spending more time with patients at the bedside.

A recent study of 36 hospitals that tracked 767 nurses nationwide, in which LIJ Medical Center participated, showed that nurses spent more than twice as much time away from the bedside than at it, which didn't surprise most nurses or administrators.

“The study was designed to track nurses’ movements and in order to understand how they spend their time, and to collect pertinent data that would be used to make nursing care and the workplace more efficient,” said Maureen White, RN, senior vice president and chief nursing officer for the North Shore-LIJ Health System. “The results of the study identified what was working and what were needless tasks or ‘wasted’ time.”

For one week in 2006, nurses took part in the largest environmental multi-site, time and motion study ever done. Nurses on LIJ’s oncology/medicine floor used an indoor position system to record their location and to see how much time they spent doing an activity. The devices, clipped to their scrubs, transmitted wireless signals to ceiling-mounted receivers connected to a local computer network, which was then compiled to data of the other hospitals. The nurses also carried a hand-held computer to document their activities throughout a shift.

Based on a nurse working a 10-hour day shift with a six-patient workload, the study’s key findings include:

- Nurses spent 20 to 38 percent of their time with patients giving direct care, which equates to about 45 to 90 minutes per day per patient.
- Documentation was the most time-consuming of all non-clinical nursing activities, with nurses spending about 16 to 34 percent of their time on this task, or 38 to 82 minutes per day per patient.
- Medication administration accounted for 12 to 18 percent of a nurse’s time, or 30 to 43 minutes per day per patient.
- Nurses walked 2.4 to 3.4 miles per shift and less during the night shift.
- “Wasted” time accounted for about 8 percent during each shift.

“The study results validate that we must create a better healthcare environment for nurses to work in and for patients to be cared for in,” said Ms. White, noting that the health system is looking at ways to reduce wasted time, such as waiting for lab results and avoiding the “hunting and gathering” method of tracking down supplies.

While hospitals cannot rely on technology or new architecture alone to make the workplace more efficient, the North Shore-LIJ Health System -- as it moves forward with new construction -- is examining processes that bring more services in the patient room for caregivers, such as a locked cabinet stocked with frequently used supplies and medications. "This prevents activities from being interrupted," said Ms. White.

Julie Deninger, RN, an LIJ nurse who participated in the study, said, "I was sad that we didn't spend more time with patients because they are sick and they need us." She said that she felt like a "pioneer" as a participant in the study and that she was paving the way for future generations of nurses so they could function better and more efficiently.

Since taking part in the study, Ms. Deninger said, "I have a new mindset. I try to perform tasks in one movement not only to save time, but so I can spend quality time with my patients, which helps them both physically and emotionally."

When Ms. Deninger recently returned from a two-week vacation, she was delighted to receive a cell phone for internal communication with other nurses about their patients. "The phones are a step in the right direction and they save time. Things are definitely changing."

--by Betty Olt

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