

Examples of Excellence

South Dakota Home Health Agency Improves Patient Vaccinations Through Consistency, Communication and Education

When St. Michael's Home Health Agency sets a goal, they don't just meet it, they surpass it. The rural agency, located in Tyndall, South Dakota, wanted to ensure that at least 90 percent of their patients received appropriate vaccinations. At the end of 2006, the agency was just short of achieving a 100 percent influenza and pneumococcal vaccination rate for their patients.



The Staff at St. Michael's Home Health Agency.

Plan of Action (POA) Development

In February 2006, following the process of investigation regarding their influenza and pneumococcal immunization rates, the quality improvement (QI) team at St. Michael's Home Health Agency gathered to write a thorough immunization plan of action (POA). The POA set a goal of greater than 90 percent influenza and pneumococcal immunization rates.

The QI team discovered that often a patient was not being immunized because the patient did not remember if, or when, he or she had received an influenza or pneumococcal immunization. The agency developed an alternative process to obtain the immunization information, including contacting physician offices, and checking the status on the Medicare Common Working File (CWF).

“While our team is always happy to administer the vaccine, we want the physician to be involved, so we communicate, giving the physician the choice to have the patient vaccinated in the clinic or by our agency,” shared Sharon Hauck, Home Health Supervisor at St. Michael's Home Health Agency. “In most cases, the physicians wish to administer the vaccinations, but are quite appreciative when the agency checks in.” St. Michael's Home Health Agency tracks home health patients' immunization data by use of a tracking form that aligns with their agency's immunization POA best practices. Ensuring that all their clients are appropriately immunized is a high priority for St. Michael's. The agency's system of tracking vaccinations helps them accomplish their goal.

Two-Way Communication

St. Michael's encourages two-way communication. When staff is aware that a patient is making a physician office visit, they send a summary note to the physician as a reminder of a needed vaccination. On the bottom of the note, there is a section for the physician to communicate back to the agency. Physicians can also use the summary note to share information about medications that were administered or prescribed as well as any changes they would like to see in the patient's plan of care. St. Michael's staff follow up with the patient after the appointment to ensure the vaccine was administered. If the patient is unsure, an agency staff member will follow up with the physician.

Immunization Promotion

Staff support of immunization promotion has been outstanding at St. Michael's. The agency provides free vaccinations to employees. In addition, employee immunizations have been successfully promoted in consistent verbal communication, poster campaigns, discussions at department meetings, and payroll communication inserts. As a result of these efforts, St. Michael's Home Health Agency achieved a 100 percent staff immunization rate.

Patient Assessment and Education

Patient education is truly the key to increase immunization rates. When a patient is unsure of his or her vaccination history, St. Michael's staff efficiently takes steps to determine the patient's vaccination history. As a result of this consistent approach, staff found three patients who repeatedly refused to receive a pneumococcal vaccination. When these patients were asked the reason for their refusal, the responses were surprising. It turned out that these patients did not realize Medicare covered influenza and pneumococcal vaccinations and therefore did not think they could afford to be vaccinated. "A little perseverance and effort on the part of our nurses about why patients objected to being vaccinated resulted in getting those patients vaccinated," shared Hauck.

Next Steps

The staff has worked hard to improve vaccination rates and the agency has achieved its original goal. However, St. Michael's Home Health Agency is not stopping there. The agency continues to strive to improve vaccination rates, particularly influenza vaccination rates since administration of this vaccine has been less consistent. With continued consistency, education, and communication, St. Michael's Home Health Agency will undoubtedly continue to improve immunizations rates, and most importantly, they will sustain the high rates of influenza and pneumococcal immunization of all their home health patients. Staff at St. Michael's also plans to begin using the Medicare CWF to determine their patients' Medicare preventive services history.

You may access St. Michael's Home Health Agency's Immunization POA and monitoring tool on the Web site of the South Dakota Foundation for Medical Care, www.sdfmc.org, under immunizations in the home health section.

Data in this article was provided by Sharon Hauck, St. Michael's Home Health Agency

St. Joseph's Long Term Home Health Care Program Topples ACH Rates

"We take a 'domino theory' approach to reducing Acute Care Hospitalization (ACH) rates," says Annette Pisano-Higley, RN, Performance Improvement Manager of St. Joseph's Medical Center Nursing Home Long Term Home Health Care Program in highly urban Yonkers, New York. "Each risk that we can reduce for a patient is one domino to fall until the last domino—ACH rates—goes down."



St. Joseph's has an active census of 400 patients on a daily basis, approximately 65 percent of whom do not use English as their primary language. So when the agency set out to improve patient immunization rates in the fall of 2006, they knew that language and finding appropriate communications resources for patients would be a key factor to increasing the agency rates for immunization.

"Language barriers impact immunization, and health literacy is very low among our demographic, which has a large new immigrant group," Pisano-Higley says. "I used resources from the Department of Health and Human Services for staff and patient education, such as posters and handouts. I also used a lot of online MedQIC resources (www.medqic.org) in terms of educational material, tools and resources. Anything that is multilingual is useful for us. I can modify it using staff language expertise to suit our particular agency."

St. Joseph's patient population is also highly dependent on Medicaid and uses the ED, which makes managing co-morbidities through immunization more difficult.

At the beginning of flu/pneumonia season in October 2006, the agency implemented an Adult Immunization Initiative and Best Practice as a proactive, early intervention ACH prevention measure. The agency placed patient adult immunization screening forms and informational brochures in patient admission folders for easy nurse access and utilization.

As part of the initiative, approximately 400 Physician Immunization Evaluation/Administration Request Letters were mailed to the primary care physicians for all active patients and new admissions. All findings from returned letters and verbal

notifications by nursing of patient vaccination are logged and results tabulated; charts and patient immunization screening forms are then updated.

Pisano-Higley says she was pessimistic about physician response rates to the letters, but as of May 31, 2007, 161 letters had been returned, resulting in:

- ▶ 160 patients receiving influenza vaccines
- ▶ 35 patients receiving pneumococcal vaccines
- ▶ 16 staff members receiving influenza vaccines.

Pisano-Higley says immunizations are a very significant factor in ACH. She sees a huge impact on hospitalization reduction for the agency's total census as a result of the immunization program they implemented. Just six months after implementing the program, St. Joseph's staff was able to:

- ▶ Reduce ACH total census percentage rate by 7.7% from the previous year, even though the census increased by 9.25%
- ▶ Reduce ACH discharged/transferred patient rate by 1.2%.

"We take a team approach and our staff really supports each other," Pisano-Higley says. We have to look at our personal best and we reward it."

Annette Pisano-Higley, RN, Performance Improvement Manager, St. Joseph's Medical Center Nursing Home Long Term Home Health Care Program provided data in this article.

