

Examples of Excellence

Berwick Home Health & Hospice Uses Local Knowledge to Get Results with Physicians

Berwick Hospital Center Home Health & Hospice Care, based in rural Berwick, Pa, is a small, hospital-based home health agency with an average patient census of 70 per month.

Due to its size, the agency does not support a full time performance improvement coordinator, but it benefits from the expertise of Lori Metzger, RN, Nurse Practitioner and per diem Performance Improvement Coordinator.

“Between the Director and myself, we cover all aspects of performance improvement,” says Metzger. “It’s a paradox; how do you say we need quality today but not tomorrow? But we need to be creative and do the bulk of the work as needed to make up for the absence of a full time position.”

The agency started efforts to reduce ACH rates by working through the Organizational Culture Change workbook provided by its QIO. Overall, the agency ACH rate has decreased seven percentage points from the time it implemented the plan of action they worked on with the QIO. Together, the agency and QIO agreed on best practices for reducing ACH, but improving communications with physicians was not an original goal. “I credit full time RNs and case managers with the decision to improve MD communications. They were the ones on the phone with the doctors all the time,” Metzger recounts.

“We have small town doctors that want to practice their way. They hang out a shingle and close on Wednesdays if they want to,” observes Metzger. “We use this to our advantage. Our doctors know our nurses and case managers, so we have been able to build a level of trust. As the case managers grew their skills, they began to demonstrate their knowledge in helping to keep patients at home.”



The staff at Berwick Hospital Center Home Health & Hospice Care.

“When we started, we didn’t have hospitalists, so we would call our doctors directly,” explains Metzger. “I could hear nurses having conversations with docs, and I would coach them on discussions. We would even put them on speaker phone, and I would sit next to the nurse and scribble notes on what to say.”

“Role playing seems hokey but it works,” says Metzger, who adds that she incorporated the technique into in-services in an informal way.

“The nurses would go through the SBAR (situation, background, assessment and recommendation) communication format with the doctors. We would work with the nurses to say things like, ‘I can keep this patient out of the emergency department (ED) if you do X, and that will keep you from having to go to the (ED) at night.’ This was a benefit for the patient and for the doctor, so the physicians started providing flexible clinical parameters of what would have been done anyway if they had been called. Doctors are now giving orders to get through the next day or so.”

“We’re home health and it’s our mission to keep the patient at home – and that’s what they want,” says Metzger.

Now two hospitalists manage inpatients at Berwick Hospital. They make rounds and rotate every 14 days, so patients see the same doctor every day. They order the labs, discharge patients and order home care if needed. Metzger says when the hospitalists are assigned to a patient, they are attentive, and there is a nice handoff to the primary care physician at discharge.

“We spend the time up front to find out who is going to own the plan of care, which often comes down to which doctor the patient is seeing more frequently. Many patients have more than one doctor, so we send complimentary copies of the plan of care to all providers involved, but build the relationship with the physician that the patient sees the most,” she says.

Investing time up front also means knowing all the players. Metzger teaches the nurses and case managers to get to know the receptionist at the doctors’ offices, and remember their names.

Metzger recognizes that her techniques might be harder for a larger agency to implement, but emphasizes small group work. “When breaking down into smaller teams, you build cohesiveness as a smaller group – you have an easier time sticking to the plan that’s laid out.” She advises, “It’s about understanding people – patients and doctors.”

Home Health Solutions Recognized as Leader in Home Care by Lynchburg Physicians

Home Health Solutions, a home care agency located in Lynchburg, Va, has taken physician communications to an entirely new level.

Through thoughtful changes regarding how they communicate with physicians in the area, they have become known as a local expert and resource of home health care.

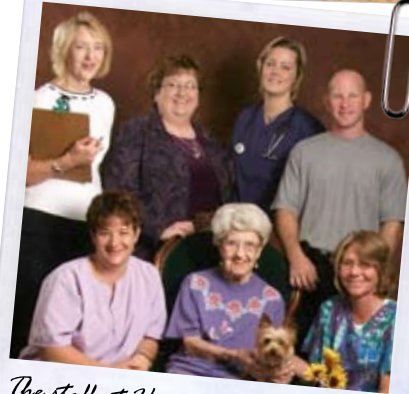
Home Health Solutions was named in the top 100 providers of the 2006 HomeCare Elite, a list that reviews Medicare-certified agencies whose performance measures in quality, improvement and financial performance are among the top 25 percent of providers nationwide. The agency had been working with a professional marketer, who advised them to create a newsletter that was being sent to all local physicians.

The agency followed up with its physician mailing list after three months of mailing out the newsletter. It was not being read! It was learned that physicians were already receiving too much mail and that many of them highly regarded the Lynchburg Academy of Medicine's newsletter *LAM Light*.

Home Health Solutions was already advertising in *LAM Light*, so Sue Irvine, administrator at Home Health Solutions, called the editor and asked if it would be possible to replace the agency advertisement with an article. The editor agreed and in the meantime, the agency halted further production of its own newsletter, which resulted in costs being cut in half.

LAM Light is read by 300 local physicians. Each month, Home Health Solutions focuses on a different aspect of home health care like occupational, speech or physical therapy; fall and balance concerns; or updates that might effect physicians such as billing and pay-for-performance.

The agency's community liaison visits the physician offices to determine if their articles have interested the readers. Not only have the physicians read the articles, but in some cases, they even ask follow up questions. If they have not had a chance to read over the article, the community liaison delivers hard copies to the offices, which has seemed to please many of the physicians.



*The staff at Home Health Solutions
with one of its patients.*

To increase awareness of home health care, Home Health Solutions has participated in the Lynchburg family residency program. Representatives from the agency meet with residents to discuss home health care. These discussion sessions have been successful in raising home care awareness and portraying Home Health Solutions as a leader in home health care and within the local medical community. In most cases, the residents remain in the Lynchburg area. By making the connection when they are beginning their residencies, Home Health Solutions builds an ever-lasting relationship with more local physicians. "When we find out where they practice after their residency, we keep following up with them to continue building that relationship," shares Irvine.

Home Health Solutions also submits a monthly column to the local newspaper. The agency has been doing this for almost three years now and uses the column to answer common questions they receive from patients and their families.

"It is a process of coming at our local physicians and patients from all angles, in order to raise awareness of the impact home health care can have," states Irvine. "We've decided that the key to reducing avoidable hospitalizations is gaining the trust and respect of the physicians. We realize it is not going to happen overnight, but if we accept this as our philosophy, and operate on a daily basis this way, we really believe it is going to make an impact."

An impact they have certainly made! With each month, Home Health Solutions gains further confirmation that its articles and columns are beneficial to area physicians. The physicians have reacted especially well to updates on billing and CMS policies that they otherwise may have missed in other literature they receive.

Next on the agenda for physician communication improvement, Home Health Solutions is targeting emergency room physicians. An educational luncheon is planned to discuss the importance of collaboration between the home care agency and the ED physician to facilitate appropriate patient-centered decision making before hospital admission. With this new venue for educating physicians, Home Health Solutions is sure to see further impact.

Data in this article was provided by Sue Irvine at Home Health Solutions.

