

Gentiva's communication initiatives decrease ACH rates



In 2010, Gentiva of Nashville implemented an initiative to reduce its acute care hospitalization rates, according to Physical Therapist Pamela Perez, who is the Safe Strides® specialty director.

To begin with, the home health agency started assessing patients' rehospitalization risk upon admission.

"By looking at co-morbidities, falls risk and the number of hospitalizations, the admitting clinician can intervene from the outset by tailoring our care to the needs of the patient or by involving additional disciplines as necessary for seniors having frequent falls," Perez said.

The agency also took several steps to improve its communication with physicians. A few years ago, the agency sent a physical therapist or occupational therapist to meet with a physician or nurse from each orthopedic practice to develop physician-specific protocols for patients who had undergone certain surgeries. Perez pointed out that the protocols cut down on unnecessary calls to physicians.

"If an issue does come up, they realize it's not Gentiva calling to ask a general question," she said. "They realize it's a problem that needs to be addressed promptly."

The enhanced communication allows for better care coordination, leading to reduced hospitalizations. In addition, the agency incorporates a communication process to discuss among the team any changes of condition to proactively address risk factors shown to increase rehospitalizations. The agency is continually working to fine-tune the communication process used in its weekly meetings. All the clinicians attend the Wednesday or Thursday morning meeting, which gives them a chance to focus on thinking about how their patients are doing before the weekend. If the patient needs a phone call or a nursing visit over the weekend, the office staff schedules it and makes sure that it happens.

"If a patient is being seen twice a week for therapy, they can go from Thursday to Monday without seeing anyone," Perez said. "We ask our clinicians, 'Who are you worried about going into the hospital?' And we always have a couple of names for interventions."

The agency also has a unique approach to helping physicians get a handle on the number of medications that home health patients are taking. Each patient receives an inexpensive plastic shoebox to put their medications in. When it is time to visit the doctor, they take the shoebox with them. Unlike a list, the shoebox of prescription bottles contains the complete information the doctor will need to decide which medications may no longer be needed.

“Our name and phone number are included, so physicians realize we are their care partners,” said Perez.

Gentiva also takes pains to communicate patient outcomes to physicians. After the patient has been released from home care, a therapist or clinical account executive visits the physician. The account executive shares data such as balance scores, gait speed, and the range of motion for the knee and other joints, so the physician can gauge the patient’s progress.

“Physicians are used to meeting with sales people, but I think this helps us build a relationship based on professional need,” said Perez. “This helps complete the picture and enhances our ongoing relationship with the physician.”

What’s more, the clinical account executives can also work with hospitals and doctors offices to help smooth patient transitions to home, Perez said.

“What we’re doing is partnering to have a better care transition, and when that happens, the reps can go in the hospital after the patient requests our services, and help patients understand what will happen, when they’re discharged from the hospital and begin home health services,” she said.

Gentiva’s efforts to improve physician communication and implement other procedures to reduce acute care hospitalization have paid off. In June 2009, the ACH rate stood at 33.7 percent. From February to April, the rate decreased to 29 percent. The May 2010 data was 23.8 percent. “This is the actual rate and not the risk-adjusted rate,” said Perez.

Local hospitals have taken note of Gentiva’s success. One hospital asked the agency to be involved in a rehospitalization task force. Another asked Gentiva to take part in a fall prevention initiative.

“Our hospital partners see us as trying to work along with them to bring down the cost of health care,” said Perez.