Ambulatory Care Nurses Emerging as Key to Outpatient Service Excellence

By Whitney Fishburn

Ambulatory care volumes have increased dramatically in recent decades, jumping by as much as 7% since 2015. This shift has led to a greater demand for physicians to perform a variety of administrative and other care-related services, all without an increase in the amount of time allotted per patient visit.

As a result, “the physician in this setting may be burning out,” Rachel Start, director of ambulatory nursing and Magnet performance at Rush Oak Park Hospital in Oak Park, Ill., said during a recent webinar on ambulatory nursing excellence. “We need to say, ‘These activities, such as care coordination, are where we as nurses excel. Let us carve that out and let us participate more proactively.’”

Until recently, ambulatory care nurses have been underutilized, but with the 2015 MACRA (Medicare Access and CHIP Reauthorization Act) officially ushering value-based care into being, Start believes the time has come for the specialty as a whole to seek a higher profile. In fact, the Institute of Medicine’s 2015 report, “Assessing Progress on the IOM Report ‘The Future of Nursing,’” stated that for health care to successfully make the transition to value-based care, nurses must lead the way, as they have the necessary skill sets to help outpatient facilities achieve better care for more people at a lower cost while also linking coverage, access, and seamless care across the care continuum, Start said.

By forging alliances across the ambulatory nursing subspecialties and ancillary services such as pharmacy and social services, creating and utilizing robust nursing-sensitive data sets, and promoting pathways to leadership, ambulatory care nurses can meet that challenge, according to Start.

“Ambulatory care nurses have not had the same level of traditional leverage that nurses at the inpatient level have had,” said Start. By seeking partnerships with local nurse leaders such as hospital CNOs and others in the hospital setting, ambulatory care staff can learn how to identify and articulate best practices, collect nursing-sensitive indicators, and understand leadership requirements.

“Ambulatory care nurses are well-prepared by their education for these roles; they don’t often have the leadership, mentorship, or empowerment to get into them, but they are ready to assume them,” Start said.

A 2017 white paper issued by the American Academy of Ambulatory Care Nursing (AAACN) calls for the advancement of these nurses, and suggests they take on a direct role in a range of activities. One emerging example of top-of-scope nursing practice in the ambulatory setting is the Patient Centered Medical Home, a population health-focused care delivery model that many ambulatory settings are leveraging to achieve higher value care to diverse populations, said Stark. “The RNs in these programs that are housed in ambulatory primary care offices are often overseeing or directly influencing care coordination and transitions management.”

Nursing-Sensitive Indicators Can Help Inform Care Redesign

The use of nursing-sensitive measures such as the National Database of Nursing Quality Indicators® (NDNQI®) can help create cultures of professional governance that allow ambulatory care nurses to remove burdens from other clinical staff and more effectively work at top of scope, according to Start. “If we want to perform a certain level of care coordination—in essence, removing activities that are lower than top of scope [for RNs]—we need data to support that,” Start said, adding that, until now, “we haven’t really had the amount of data we’ve needed to prove what the care delivery redesign needs to be.”

AT A GLANCE

- As more inpatient services are shifted to outpatient facilities, ambulatory care nurses have an opportunity to help organizations achieve nursing excellence.
- The path forward for ambulatory care nurses to expand their influence includes seeking greater levels of responsibility and authority, while leveraging nursing-sensitive data to proactively define their role in delivering patient-centered care.
- Empowering top-of-scope practice in the ambulatory care setting is critical to achieving nursing excellence and delivering patient-centered care.
Although thorough data collection takes time and patience, according to Start, having it will help funnel ambulatory care nurses toward the top of their scope of practice and into leadership roles. Robust data-driven initiatives already are underway by a number of nursing professional societies and other organizations, such as the Collaborative Alliance for Nursing Outcomes and Press Ganey. These initiatives aim to formalize evidence-based competency requirements for ambulatory care nurses and create other tools these nurses can use to demonstrate and hone their professional skills, both in clinical and executive roles. The focus of these initiatives to date has been on acute care, although the emphasis now is moving toward learning how primary and specialty care can benefit from focusing on standardizing ambulatory care nursing, especially according to Magnet definitions of duties.

Individual ambulatory care settings can contribute to the use of data to evolve the field by running test pilots in their respective organizations, Start said. She recommended looking at measuring what might already be running well, developing manageable initiatives such as tracking what might be affecting outcomes in patients with venous leg ulcers, or tracking no-shows to determine how to increase patient access.

Start advised that the most useful measure areas developed to date compare quality indicators of structure and process such as nursing staff skill mix, RN education, certification, and patient visits or procedures with quality outcomes relative to health promotion, disease prevention, telehealth, care coordination, and patient safety.

“Our push now is for ambulatory settings to get their data into one of these databases,” Start said. “We’re just not going to be able to have those meaningful benchmarks in place [without the data]. That’s the call I have been putting out.”

Having these benchmarks makes quantifying ambulatory care nurses’ overall economic impact in health care delivery easier, which leads to them being assigned their proper value in an organization, according to Start. The use of nursing-sensitive indicators in the inpatient setting already has led to the National Quality Forum endorsing standardized, evidence-based acute care measures, and has paved the way for additional patient safety, quality, and work environment measures that are now considered the gold standard, said Start.

Meaningful data collection and analysis also can help define and strengthen the overall structure necessary for the field to grow. This might include a parity definition for an ambulatory CNO, a perspective on professional governance, clearly delineated outcome descriptions, Magnet designation criteria, reliable ways to disseminate best practices, and appropriate training criteria. Data also help stratify subspecialties such as patient education, billable medical wellness and prevention programs, and patient safety oversight, among others, Start said.

Data collection is also influencing how future generations of ambulatory care nurses are recruited and trained. Traditionally, ambulatory care settings have not tended to hire recent nursing graduates, preferring seasoned nurses who can operate independently and without backup. However, Start said data are forcing this to change. “Residency programs are starting to pop up because of these volume needs.”

Once the data are collected, Start assured that data points on ambulatory care nursing are subjected to a rigorous review, per the National Quality Forum consensus model, with technical expert panels that validate the measurements and methods and determine the utility of the data collected, while also determining what data sets are missing and whether barriers exist to collecting them.

With evidence-based clinical and administrative ladders in place, along with leadership that continually reinforces their importance through mentoring and messaging, the field will be poised to influence how challenges such as nurse staffing shortages, clinician burnout, and diminished access to safe, high-quality care are addressed across the health care continuum, Start said.