The Valley Hospital Improves Patient Experience and Nurse Engagement by Turning to Holistic Care

By Whitney McKnight

In the 15 years since The Valley Hospital in Ridgewood, New Jersey, began training its nurses in the holistic concepts of self-care, mindfulness and therapeutic presence, the 451-bed acute care community hospital has seen a transformation in its nursing staff and in patients’ perception of the care they receive.

In 2001, in an effort to reverse a high level of apathy among the nursing staff and poor performance on patient experience surveys, the nursing leadership established a relationship with the BirchTree Center for Healthcare Transformation to bring the Integrative Healing Arts Academy (IHAA) to its northern New Jersey campus. With a yearlong curriculum based on the principles of holistic health and person-centered care, the IHAA teaches and encourages nurses to develop a healing presence with the patients in their care by first caring for themselves.

At the time, according to Anne Marie Leichman, MSN, RN, chief nursing officer and senior vice president of patient services at Valley, “there was a lack of compassionate caring presence, high RN turnover, low patient satisfaction, quality-of-care issues, and a lack of staff engagement and participation in programs.” Through the IHAA program, the previous CNO hoped to “reignite the soul of nursing,” Leichman said during a Press Ganey CNO Roundtable webinar.

Taught annually in groups of 25 to 30 participants, the IHAA program introduces nurses to the basics of integrated care. Participants are taught the scientific basis for mind-body-spirit health care and learn the art of integrating complementary and alternative medicine (CAM) practices (e.g., music therapy, guided imagery, meditation techniques, aromatherapy, energy-based healing therapies) within nursing practice. The course is typically taught in four consecutive sessions, with each session lasting three to four days and building on previous sessions. In addition to an overview of evidence-based, complementary therapies, the course emphasizes self-awareness and self-renewal, according to Leichman. “It’s important that we reinforce the relationship between caring for one’s self and the capacity to increase excellence in nursing,” she said, noting that self-care is fundamental to resilience, which protects against burnout and leads to increased compassion for others.

“In a nutshell, what it means is to be conscious of what you’re doing when you’re with a patient—to be very intentional, and to really be with that patient as a healing instrument in any interaction you have. It’s something that the nurse has control over and it’s not a task that adds more time to their busy day. They are already going into the patient’s room to provide care, so it’s really just about [their mindset when] they do it,” Leichman said.

In 2004, Leichman and a colleague obtained a grant to measure the impact the voluntary curriculum was having on Valley’s work environment. They asked two inpatient nursing units to send at least half their staff through the program. Staff from a third unit who did not enroll in the course served as the study’s control group. A comparison of metrics from 2003 through 2005 showed marked decreases in turnover and improvement in patient experience in the two intervention units, and small improvements in the control unit.
“We knew we were on to something, and these results really motivated us to keep going, but we realized we weren’t seeing the spread for holistic practices we had anticipated with more and more graduates coming out of the program,” Leichman recalled.

Attributing the sluggish dissemination to the fact that leadership personnel were not being directly exposed to the curriculum, the team began offering hospital management staff a two-day introductory course to the basics of holistic care. “This was truly the turning point for us. We saw the integration of holistic practices into the workflow at a pace we’d never seen prior to leadership taking this two-day course,” Leichman said, noting that many leadership staff went on to enroll in the year-long program. “If there is a pearl of wisdom I can impart, it would be to bring leadership on quicker than we did,” she stated.

Word of the academy’s success has spread over the years, as has the demand for Valley’s expertise and leadership in the integrated healing arts field. The hospital now has a Center for the Advancement of Integrative Healing and has developed a line of educational DVDs, videos and other materials which are also made available to patients to help them manage the stress of illness. The center sponsors an annual conference that is consistently well-attended, an indication of the demand by nurses for more of this kind of training, particularly to help with stress management, Leichman said.

Since the program began, more than 300 hospital personnel have graduated from the academy. The hospital also now sponsors any IHAA graduates to pursue national certification in holistic nursing. “We realized we were giving nurses a gift by sending them through this program, and that they should accept the role of being experts and leaders in this field,” Leichman said.

At present, The Valley Hospital has the highest number (82) of nationally certified holistic nurses for which it received the first-ever institutional award from the American Holistic Nurses Association.

Evidence of the program’s success can be seen in measures of nurse engagement and patient experience. In 2016, the rate of nurse turnover at Valley was 8%, which is approximately 5% lower than the average for the northeast region. The hospital also outperformed state and national averages for nurse communication and pain control scores during the same period, and received top-box scores for Overall Rating and Likelihood to Recommend from, respectively, 78% and 81% of patient survey respondents. With seven other acute care hospitals within a 10-mile radius of The Valley Hospital, such high performance on markers of patient loyalty is especially notable in today’s competitive health care market.

The success of the IHAA program has meant the hospital is willing to cover the costs of two full-time integrated nurse consultants and a holistic birth care coordinator, according to Leichman. Such support didn’t seem likely when the program first started, because there was doubt among staff about its utility, she said. “We did have people who were very skeptical, and afraid that it would negatively impact the science of what we did in nursing. But bar none, when [people graduate from the course], they come out and say, ‘Now I understand.’ When we talk to them about presence and setting their intention, their whole mindset changes. You can’t take care of other people unless you take care of yourself.”