

Addressing the Critical Shortage of Nursing Staff

In 2009 it is expected that the bill for national healthcare costs will be around \$2.5 trillion and account for 17.6% of gross domestic product, a full percentage point up from 2008. A report by CMS is predicting that by 2018, if unchecked, healthcare costs will rise to a staggering \$4.35 trillion, which is an average of around \$13,000 per US resident. This will represent 20.3% of GDP, of which 51.3% will have to be picked up by the Federal Government through Medicare and Medicaid.

This report does not include the effect of the recently enacted stimulus package, the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) 2009, however it gives us a sense of the direction in which we are currently heading.

One of the headline goals of the new Obama Administration is to reform the healthcare system. Although the details of exactly what will be covered by these changes is still unknown, one thing is for sure, and that is the primary goals of the program will be to reduce costs and to extend coverage to the millions of currently uninsured.

The big question is how to reduce costs without compromising the quality of medical care. With an aging population the demand for high quality medical services is not going away and in the long term, the requirements will be for more capacity. One solution to reducing costs is to let staff go. But in some critical areas such as nursing, there are already shortages. Peter Buerhaus of Vanderbilt University, author of a book about the future of the nursing workforce, estimates that the national nursing shortage could reach 500,000 by 2025. This concern is reflected in the healthcare community.

One new initiative is The Center to Champion Nursing in America, a joint initiative of AARP, the AARP Foundation, and the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. This initiative has been established to address the growing issue of nurse and nursing faculty shortages. This group is looking at how out of the \$500 million set aside in the ARRA for dealing with the critical healthcare shortages, \$200 million of that is specifically ear-



marked for nursing and primary care providers. Of course there is no quick fix to recruiting and training people to fill these roles. Money alone to recruit and train new nursing staff is not a cure-all to the problem of shortages. Nursing is often pictured to be a glamorous career on many popular prime time television programs. On the contrary, nursing is a demanding career with low pay, long hours and plenty of stress and are just a few of the things that make retaining staff challenging. Often new recruits are thrown in at the deep end with little supervision and immediately required to make life and death decisions. Furthermore, with some hospitals trimming their staff in other areas such as lab technicians, transporters and other ancillary employees, it is the nurses who are having to take on these areas that no one else is available to do.

It is not surprising then that, according to a national study, 1 in 5 newly licensed nurses leave within one year of starting. Turn-over rate, as well as recruitment, is a couple of the areas being addressed by the Center to Champion Nursing in America and the fact that many hospitals are recognizing the issue themselves has enhanced their retention activities through residency training programs.

We have undertaken many projects in healthcare facilities through the years and as well as the headline benefits of saving costs and eliminating waste we have seen numerous examples of significant improvement in staff morale. Streamlining processes can help take away those frustrating, time-consuming and non-valued added tasks and allow nurse, physicians and support staff to dedicate their time to the critical aspects of the job role.



*“Improving organizations
one process at a time”*

