

Using a “Capacity Physician” to find creative, collaborative solutions to overcrowding

MASSACHUSETTS GENERAL HOSPITAL

The Massachusetts General Hospital (MGH) emergency department (ED) is a busy Level 1 Trauma Center located in downtown Boston that sees over 100,000 patient visits each year.

Challenge

One known contributing factor to ED crowding is the limited number of available beds in inpatient units. Aggressive bed management along with the use of alternative spaces to ED boarding while beds become available that are safe and effective could alleviate moments of high crowding.

Action

The Capacity Physician model can be described as an aggressive, centralized bed management system with an experienced physician at the helm. Dr. Peter Dunn is an anesthesiologist at MGH who has spent years grappling with the challenges associated with limited hospital capacity and high patient demand. These many years helped to prepare Dr. Dunn, in early 2018, to assume the newly created role of “Capacity Physician” at MGH. As MGH’s Capacity Physician, Dunn is empowered to perform two vital tasks for an overburdened hospital. First, he must create an environment among his peers in the hospital that helps everyone “get to yes” when it comes to accommodating patients who need to be cared for at MGH even when beds might be tight. Second, he takes a systems approach to analyzing the hospital’s capacity challenges, and proposes systems solutions that can alleviate recurrent capacity issues.

The Capacity Physician role is inherently collaborative in nature and requires a physician-leader who is flexible, creative and not prone to the tribalism that sometimes

comes with identifying too intensely with a given clinical specialty. At MGH, the Capacity Physician shares leadership with the nursing and admitting leadership, who are key partners in helping solve the daily challenges such as finding space for a complicated outside hospital transfer patient or managing the dynamic intra-hospital patient flow among the many units. In order to do the job well, the Capacity Physician must be a seasoned physician who has an expansive network of colleagues within the hospital and a good record of collaboration across departments. Often, the solution to a difficult capacity problem will require several departments to flex in order to accommodate a patient’s special needs. The Capacity Physician must have the ability to imagine a solution to the problem and the clout and relationships to see it through.

Keys to success

To be successful, the Capacity Physician must also have the support of leadership at the highest levels. Since the job may ultimately involve reallocating vital hospital resources such as beds and space, the Capacity Physician must have the trust of leadership and the ability to make tough calls. For example, MGH just began the rollout of a bed-reallocation initiative throughout the hospital system, which led to beds being reallocated between services based on computer simulation models of ideal patient load. Though sometimes difficult, the work is essential as the hospital continues to face an ever-growing demand for its services. “The real issue is culture change,” said Dr. Dunn. “There needs to be an awareness that capacity management is everyone’s responsibility and everyone’s opportunity to contribute to high quality, efficient patient care.”