

Eliminating interruptions to improve emergency care

STURDY MEMORIAL HOSPITAL

Sturdy Memorial Hospital is a 132-bed community hospital located in Attleboro. The emergency care center at Sturdy sees over 50,000 patient visits each year.

Challenge

Studies of emergency department (ED) clinicians show that their work is interrupted anywhere from five to 15 times per hour during a given clinical shift. Interruptions may take the form of face-to-face interactions with colleagues or urgent pager, text or EHR messages that must be addressed. Such interruptions can make it difficult to maintain focus on any one task, and can lead to errors when tasks are not completed, completed while task-switching, or rushed to make up for the interruption.

At Sturdy Memorial Hospital, the ED team identified non-urgent interruptions as an impediment to high quality care in the ED. The group observed and documented work processes and patient flow, as well as staffing structure, team interactions and task loads. They assessed requirements of both physicians and nurses, looking for ways to reassign or eliminate tasks. They found that providers were interrupted six to eight times per shift to take referral calls or critical values, and information about incoming patients wasn't centralized.

Action

From this, Sturdy Memorial developed and implemented several new approaches, including assigning referral calls to the nursing staff and creating an electronic system that tied referral call information to the patient, so all ED staff could access details about incoming visits regardless of who took the referral call.

The ED team created printed notepads for less-emergent notifications so providers are not interrupted during patient visits. Nurses write notes on the pad regarding medication or reminders about tests and include the patient name and room number. They place the notes in a specified bin for each provider, who addresses the request when they are finished with their initial task. Before implementing the use of the notepads, nurses would either interrupt providers, or use scraps of paper and leave notes on keyboards, which would often get lost or overlooked.

The team also established a process where the nursing staff takes all critical values and assigns the lab discrepancy process to one person on one shift. This shift is double and triple covered allowing time for one person to manage the process, which often took days to complete prior.

Keys to success

For Sturdy Memorial, the key to successfully identifying solutions to high-interruption tasks was involving the entire ED staff in the process from the beginning. Physicians and nurses worked collaboratively to assess the problem and developed workable solutions that made sense for everyone. Workload was carefully considered so staff could effectively take on new tasks with team support.