

Clinical guidelines help emergency departments provide best care possible

UMASS MEMORIAL HEALTH CARE

UMass Memorial Health Care is the largest healthcare system in Central MA with three hospitals and over 1,000 beds. The emergency department (ED) at UMass Memorial has two campuses, University and Memorial, as well as a separate pediatric emergency department, and treats approximately 135,000 patients annually.

Challenge

It is fairly well-established that written clinical practice guidelines can improve quality of care and reduce costs via standardization. Effective guidelines standardize care while still allowing for deviation and physician discretion when it is appropriate to do so. The challenge is to create guidelines that physicians will find easy to use and accessible.

Action

At UMass Memorial Hospital, emergency department (ED) clinical guidelines have been in place for many years, but a formalized system for their development, implementation and ongoing surveillance began around 2010. In the current state, ED clinical guideline development is overseen by the ED System Quality and Patient Experience Committee. This committee is comprised of the physician clinical leads from each of the UMass hospitals. While some guidelines may be adopted directly from the American College of Emergency Physicians' clinical policies, UMass also has a process for developing internal guidelines. One individual on the committee will be charged with drafting the guidelines based on current research, and vetting it through the entire group of ED providers. The committee then decides to approve, not approve, or recommend edits. This simple structure allows for efficient delegation of responsibilities, easier global buy-in and a more streamlined approval process.

Although the creation and vetting of these guidelines is important, guidelines are only useful if they are easily accessible to providers at the point of care and are perceived as helpful. When the idea of clinical pathways was first presented, some UMass providers had concerns around providing "cookbook medicine." While those concerns have largely fallen away because deviation from them in appropriate cases is supported, the challenge remains to encourage providers to regularly refer to the guidelines rather than rely on memory.

Keys to success

Recently, UMass Memorial ED residents addressed the challenge of guideline accessibility through a process improvement project. Instead of the previously used internal website, residents created a password-protected wiki page. The wiki page holds the ED's approximately guidelines as well as links to guidelines from other departments within the hospital. The wiki is accessible to physicians as well as advanced practice clinicians via links in the Epic electronic health records system, thereby facilitating access at the point of care. Updating the old website was often tedious and guidelines would have to be updated in multiple places. Updating guidelines and links on the wiki page is much easier. Furthermore, data collected internally shows that the wiki is being used more often than its predecessor.

In addition to a more use-friendly site, UMass Memorial regularly looks for ways to remind providers of the value of referring back to the guidelines. They have explored showing providers their individual data on compliance with specific guidelines. This is not meant to be punitive, but rather to establish a sense of accountability and transparency. Consistently safe clinical care is the goal of every provider, and simple, easily accessible guidelines make that goal more achievable.