Unveiling the Transformative Potential of Virtual Nursing

Tucked away in a dedicated, secure room, Jackie sits at her computer and awaits her next patient to join a virtual call. Today, Jackie is Upstate's virtual discharge nurse during a pilot run of the new program that allows her to assist bedside nurses by providing discharge instructions and education to patients.

Jackie has been a nurse for over 20 years at Upstate Medical University. "I've spent many years as a bedside nurse and have experienced the challenges of having one or more patients at the same time who require a high level of care, alongside patients who are waiting on me for their discharge instructions before they can leave the hospital. It can be stressful when you are balancing providing hands-on care alongside the administrative pieces of discharging patients. Everyone deserves the same amount of personal care, but some patients have needs that can't be delayed," says Jackie.

Discharge planning and education can be a time-consuming process for nurses. The delay of patient discharge due to workload challenges can have a significant impact on throughput and the patient experience. Having a dedicated discharge nurse, now able to join the patient virtually, directly and positively impacts the quality of the discharge process for both nurses and patients by offering adequate time for patients and their caregivers to have all of their questions answered.

What is Virtual Nursing?

Virtual nursing, also known as telehealth nursing or remote nursing, is a healthcare delivery model that leverages digital technology and telecommunication tools to connect nurses with patients inside the hospital. It allows registered nurses and nurse practitioners to provide clinical support and education to patients and their caregivers via virtual platforms. The virtual nursing concept serves as a bridge between healthcare providers and patients and can encompass various forms tailored to meet needs of both the healthcare system and patients.

As healthcare institutions navigate a landscape shaped by digital advancements, virtual nursing is becoming more prevalent and revolutionizing the way healthcare systems deliver dedicated patient care. From remote admission and discharges to proactive monitoring, virtual nursing has the potential to have a profound impact for both healthcare professionals and the individuals they serve.

Virtual Nursing: A Familiar Concept with a Modern Twist

The idea of virtual healthcare isn't entirely new. Remote patient monitoring and telehealth have been around for quite some time. However, the COVID pandemic acted as a catalyst, pushing healthcare entities to explore new ways to provide care beyond traditional boundaries.

"We have been strategically thinking about how to increase the use of telehealth at Upstate. COVID really demonstrated the benefit of telehealth and the ability to offer virtual visits in the ambulatory (outpatient) offices. But patients *in* the hospital were also affected during the pandemic. Most healthcare systems had restricted visitor policies meaning that caregivers often couldn't be in the hospital to receive discharge instructions alongside the patient. So, while our initial focus had been on ambulatory services offering telehealth visits, the reality is that the same concept can be utilized within the hospital walls to alleviate some of the many tasks currently handled by nurses," says Margie Greenfield, Program Manager in the Information Management and Technology (IMT) Healthcare Information Systems department. We asked ourselves, "*how do we improve the quality of the time we spend with our patients inside the hospital?*"

Virtual nursing emerged as a versatile solution, to not only assist bedside nurses but augment and improve the patient care experience, proving that it's not just a temporary fix but a model that can seamlessly integrate with and complement existing healthcare systems. Virtual nurses are able to observe, answer questions, connect with family members, and take on tasks that don't necessarily demand physical proximity.

"An impactful angle to this pilot is the ability to include family members or caregivers in the discharge education, even if they're not in the room," says Scott Jessie, Chief Nursing Officer at Upstate Medical University. "We know that an important piece of reducing readmission rates is adherence to discharge protocol and aftercare instructions. Allowing caregivers access to the same information as the patient is pivotal is ensuring that those who are providing aftercare are well informed and are afforded the ability to have their questions answered as well."

A Solution to Staffing Woes

Staffing challenges in healthcare are well known. It's a constant struggle to find and retain skilled nursing professionals. Virtual nursing serves as a potential solution in the face of these challenges. It's not just a band-aid solution; it's a dynamic approach that taps into the vast pool of experienced nurses who may want to continue their careers but in a role that's less physically demanding all while still having the ability to interact with patients. It also allows bedside nurses to do more of what they truly love, spending time taking care of patients with less focus on administrative tasks.

"By embracing virtual nursing, we not only address immediate staffing concerns but also create an avenue for seasoned nursing professionals to contribute their wealth of knowledge in novel and impactful ways," says Jessie. "It's not about replacing the human touch but rather enhancing it, making healthcare more accessible, personalized, and efficient."

Evaluating the Pilot

So, what does the future hold for virtual nursing? The possibilities are endless, but the stakes are high. Through this pilot, Upstate will closely gauge patient and staff feedback. "If we don't see a marked increase in patient and staff satisfaction, we'll need to take a closer look at how we are handling this," says Greenfield. "There are very specific criteria for patients to be eligible for the virtual discharge pilot. For example, we need to ensure that technology is not a barrier for the patient. The bedside nurse will run through a series of questions that will determine whether patients are eligible to participate."

If eligible, the patient and their caregiver, if not in the room, will receive a link on their smartphone to join a safe, private Virtual Care Room with a virtual discharge nurse, like Jackie. The virtual nurse will help communicate the information that patients will need after leaving the hospital. The discussion may include talking about prescriptions and aftercare instructions, as well as who to contact if there is a question or a problem. But most importantly, the virtual nurse will provide dedicated, individualized attention to answer any questions the patient or caregiver may have.

The potential of virtual nursing goes far beyond the screens and devices; it's about creating an experience that's truly patient-centric and adaptable to the evolving needs of our healthcare system. "I foresee the expansion of virtual nursing as a transformative solution that not only addresses staffing challenges but liberates bedside nurses to invest more meaningful time with their patients. By leveraging digital platforms to handle administrative tasks, we enable bedside nurses to focus on what they do best – providing hands-on, compassionate care. This expansion is not just about efficiency; it's about enhancing the personal touch in healthcare, ensuring patients receive the attention and connection they truly deserve," says Todd Schuler, Assistant Director of Nursing Informatics at Upstate Medical University.

Virtual nursing is poised to play an increasingly crucial role in the healthcare ecosystem. This innovative model of care has the potential to bridge healthcare disparities and improve patient outcomes. As virtual nursing becomes more prevalent, it is likely to become an integral part of the healthcare landscape, ultimately enhancing the quality of care and the overall patient experience.

Published on Monday, December 11, 2023