VIRTUAL NURSING
UNLOCKED

A Comprehensive Guide for Hospital Administrators

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INTRODUCTION

In today's rapidly evolving healthcare landscape, hospitals face unprecedented challenges—rising patient demands, shrinking resources, and a critical shortage of healthcare workers. The virtual nursing model, powered by advanced technology, has emerged as a transformative strategy that allows hospitals to not only enhance patient care but also address workforce shortages and improve operational efficiency. This white paper, co-authored by Equum Medical and eVisit, consolidates insights from the recent webinar *"Virtual Nursing Unlocked"*, offering hospital administrators a step-by-step guide to successfully integrating and scaling virtual nursing within their organizations.

Virtual nursing is a powerful tool for addressing the dual pressures of workforce shortages and the increasing need for quality, efficient patient care. However, its successful adoption requires clear strategy, robust leadership buy-in, and a commitment to continuous improvement. This paper provides actionable takeaways, leveraging key insights from industry experts:

- Kristen Lawton, Chief Nursing Officer at **Equum Medical**,

- Linda Lockwood, **Senior Advisor at AVIA**

- Sarah Bell, Chief Clinical Officer at **OutcomesAI**

> **"Virtual nursing is an extension of the care team, not a replacement. It enhances the patient experience and allows bedside nurses to focus on critical aspects of care."**
>
> **KRISTEN LAWTON, CNO OF EQUUM MEDICAL**

UNDERSTANDING VIRTUAL NURSING

Virtual nursing is a practice that uses technology to enable healthcare providers to deliver care remotely. Virtual nurses work alongside bedside clinicians, offering an extension of the care team to monitor patients, handle administrative tasks, and provide support to both patients and clinical staff. This model allows hospitals to continue providing high-quality care despite staff shortages, alleviate the burden on bedside nurses, and increase operational efficiency.

As **Kristen Lawton, CNO of Equum Medical,** explained, "Virtual nursing is an extension of the care team, not a replacement. It enhances the patient experience and allows bedside nurses to focus on critical aspects of care." Virtual nurses handle a variety of tasks, such as monitoring patient progress, answering questions, assisting with discharges, and guiding patients through their care journeys. By taking on these responsibilities, virtual nurses help reduce the administrative burden on bedside nurses and improve workflow efficiency.

> ## "The first step is getting executive buy-in. It's not just a pilot; it's a new care delivery model."
>
> **LINDA LOCKWOOD, SENIOR ADVISOR AT AVIA**

KEY BENEFITS OF VIRTUAL NURSING:

- **Alleviating Staffing Pressures:** Virtual nursing helps mitigate the shortage of bedside nurses, especially during high-demand periods, by providing additional support without requiring physical presence.

- **Improved Patient Flow:** Virtual nurses can handle routine tasks such as admissions and discharges, allowing bedside nurses to focus on more complex, hands-on patient care, thereby improving patient throughput and reducing bottlenecks in care delivery.

- **Enhancing Nurse Satisfaction and Retention:** By relieving bedside nurses of administrative tasks, virtual nursing enhances job satisfaction, potentially reducing turnover rates and improving retention.

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THE CASE FOR VIRTUAL NURSING

The case for adopting virtual nursing has never been stronger, as hospitals are confronted with severe workforce shortages. According to projections, over 800,000 nurses are expected to leave the bedside by 2027, creating a critical gap in care delivery. The global nursing shortage is even more alarming, with an estimated shortfall of 13 million nurses by 2030. In light of these statistics, virtual nursing is not just an option—it's a necessary solution for sustaining quality care while managing staff shortages.

Linda Lockwood, Senior Advisor at AVIA, noted, "The first step is getting executive buy-in. It's not just a pilot; it's a new care delivery model." For virtual nursing to succeed, it must be framed as a core element of the hospital's care strategy, not merely a temporary fix. Involving C-suite executives, especially finance, from the outset ensures that virtual nursing aligns with the hospital's strategic priorities and objectives. It also sets the stage for securing the resources needed to scale the program.

VIRTUAL NURSING ADDRESSES SEVERAL KEY OPERATIONAL CHALLENGES:

- **Staffing shortages:** By extending the care team, virtual nursing helps ensure that patient needs are met, even with fewer on-site nurses.

- **Burnout:** Reducing the administrative burden on bedside nurses helps prevent burnout, which has become a significant concern in the healthcare industry.

- **Patient outcomes:** Studies have shown that virtual care models can improve patient outcomes, such as reducing readmissions and enhancing discharge planning, by ensuring patients receive continuous, high-quality care throughout their hospital stay.

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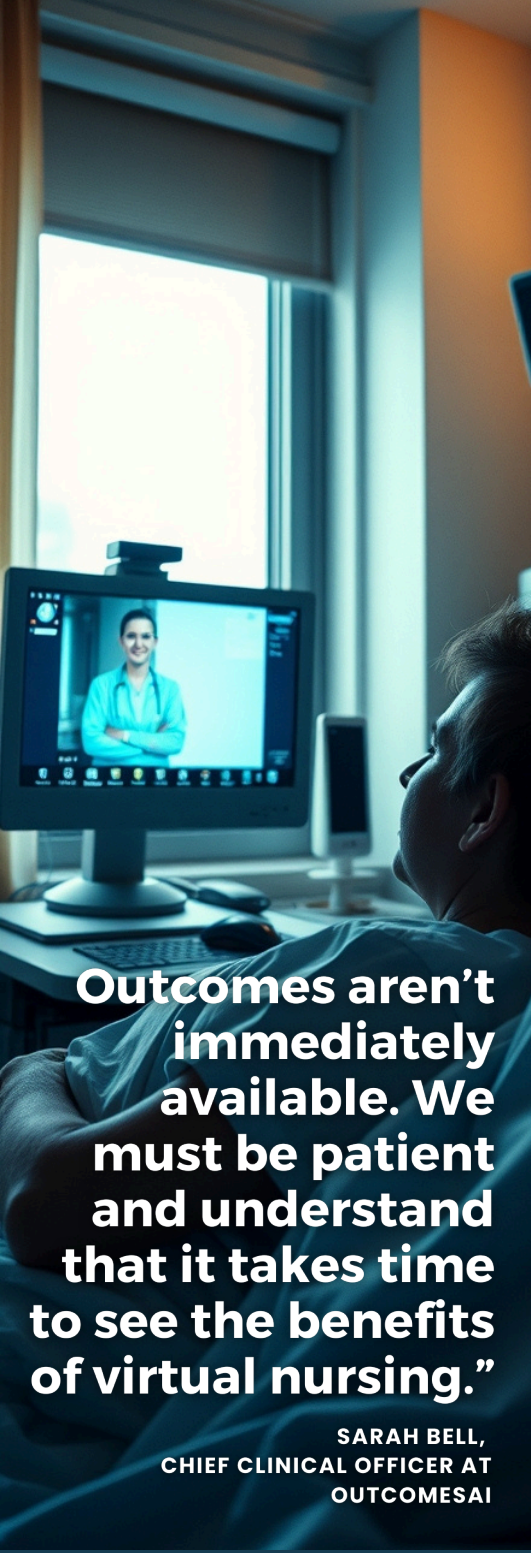
IMPLEMENTING VIRTUAL NURSING

Successful implementation of virtual nursing requires careful planning, clear goals, and strong leadership support. The process can be broken down into four key stages: **assessment, foundation-building, training, and technology integration.**

1. ASSESSING ORGANIZATIONAL READINESS

Before launching a virtual nursing program, hospital administrators need to assess their organization's readiness. The primary indicators of readiness include existing staffing challenges, high turnover rates, and operational inefficiencies that could be alleviated by virtual nursing. Kristen Lawton emphasized, "It's essential to diagnose the problems within your nursing workforce before implementing virtual care solutions". Hospitals must carefully evaluate their staffing needs, the extent of burnout, and the specific areas where virtual nursing can provide immediate value.

2. BUILDING A STRONG FOUNDATION

Once the need for virtual nursing has been identified, the next step is to build a strong foundation. This begins with gaining buy-in from the C-suite, particularly from finance, to ensure that virtual nursing initiatives align with the hospital's strategic and financial goals. As Linda Lockwood pointed out, "Involve leadership from the start and be clear about what you're measuring. Setting clear KPIs is essential for tracking progress". By establishing clear goals and metrics from the outset, administrators can ensure that virtual nursing programs are not only successful but also sustainable.

> **Outcomes aren't immediately available. We must be patient and understand that it takes time to see the benefits of virtual nursing."**
>
> **SARAH BELL,
> CHIEF CLINICAL OFFICER AT
> OUTCOMESAI**

KEY STEPS IN BUILDING THE FOUNDATION:

- **Secure executive buy-in** from leadership, including finance, to ensure long-term support.

- **Set clear objectives** for virtual nursing programs, such as reducing discharge times, improving nurse retention, or enhancing patient satisfaction.

- **Establish KPIs** that align with these objectives to measure success. These might include nurse satisfaction, patient outcomes, and operational efficiency.

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3. TRAINING AND COMMUNICATION

Training is a critical component of virtual nursing implementation. Virtual nurses must be well-versed in using the technology and understanding their roles within the larger care team. Bedside nurses, too, need to be trained on how to work effectively with virtual nurses to ensure seamless collaboration. Regular communication between both teams ensures that workflows are optimized and any issues are addressed promptly.

Sarah Bell, Chief Clinical Officer at OutcomesAI, emphasized that "Outcomes aren't immediately available. We must be patient and understand that it takes time to see the benefits of virtual nursing." Building trust between virtual and bedside nurses is essential, and this takes time and continuous feedback loops. Incorporating real-world feedback early on allows hospitals to make adjustments and optimize the program as it grows.

4. TECHNOLOGY INTEGRATION AND KPIs

Technology plays a crucial role in virtual nursing. The technology used must seamlessly integrate into existing workflows to avoid creating additional complexity. As Sarah Bell highlighted, "The technology has to seamlessly fit into the nurses' day-to-day work". Whether using simple devices like iPads or more complex bedside cameras, the goal is to enhance the nurse's ability to provide care, not distract from it.

KEY KPIs:

- **Nurse Retention:** Monitoring retention rates will help assess whether virtual nursing is reducing burnout and increasing job satisfaction.

- **Patient Satisfaction:** Collecting feedback from patients on their experiences with virtual care can help evaluate the quality and effectiveness of the program.

- **Operational Metrics:** Metrics such as discharge times, admission efficiency, and the number of virtual care interactions can provide insights into how virtual nursing is enhancing hospital operations.

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SCALING VIRTUAL NURSING PROGRAM

While starting small is important, hospitals must also plan for scaling their virtual nursing programs to ensure long-term success. Sarah Bell recommended, "Staged implementation is important because when introducing something new, issues are inevitable. Virtual nursing programs must evolve from day one to day four". Hospitals should start with units that can demonstrate quick wins, such as surgical or high-flow units, where tasks like discharges can be efficiently managed by virtual nurses. Over time, the program can be expanded to include other units and specialties.

CONSIDERATIONS FOR SCALING:

- **Focus on quick wins:** Start with units that will benefit from virtual nursing immediately, such as surgical units that have high patient turnover.

- **Decentralized vs. Centralized Staffing:** Many hospitals are exploring decentralized models, where virtual nurses work remotely, often across different time zones. This can help optimize staffing and improve nurse satisfaction.

- **Mentorship and retention:** Virtual nursing can also serve as a tool for mentoring and retaining new nurses, providing additional support in a challenging work environment.

THE FUTURE OF VIRTUAL NURSING

Looking ahead, virtual nursing will continue to evolve and expand. Virtual nurses may eventually take on more responsibilities, including participating in rounding, assisting with interdisciplinary rounds, and providing post-acute care. The integration of AI and other advanced technologies will further enhance the capabilities of virtual nursing teams, enabling real-time decision support and improving patient outcomes.

As Linda Lockwood stated, "Virtual nursing is the linchpin, and expanding those use cases will help hospitals move beyond pilot programs to full-scale integration". By embracing virtual nursing as a core component of care delivery, hospitals can ensure they remain agile in the face of workforce challenges and continue to provide high-quality care to patients.

Virtual nursing offers a powerful solution to the challenges faced by hospitals today, from staffing shortages to operational inefficiencies. By integrating virtual nursing into their care models, hospitals can improve patient outcomes, reduce nurse burnout, and enhance overall efficiency. However, successful implementation requires clear leadership, strategic planning, and a commitment to continuous improvement.

Equum Medical and eVisit are here to help guide hospitals through the process of implementing and scaling virtual nursing programs. For more information on how virtual nursing can transform your organization, we invite you to reach out to our teams for a tailored consultation.

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