Finding ways to maintain and improve the quality of care your organization provides can prove to be a daunting challenge. With legislative changes from the Affordable Care Act (ACA), that demand a higher level of clinical outcomes, along with declines in Medicare and Medicaid reimbursements, healthcare organizations around the country are looking for more effective ways of providing the highest quality care within a tighter budget.

In the past, acuity-based systems were known to be highly subjective, inconsistent and unreliable. Today, however, these systems can be much more consistent and accurate, based on scientific data, practice evidence and the ability to pull information directly from a single source of truth, the electronic health record (EHR). With the help of patient acuity technology, many thriving healthcare organizations are leveraging patient information and automatically matching it with employee data from their staffing system to more reliably match caregiver skills to patient needs. Pairing data on patient needs with staff information is powerful and can drive a host of efficiencies for healthcare organizations. The following are three ways acuity-based staffing can benefit your organization, all while meeting today’s care standards:

1. **EQUITABLE ASSIGNMENTS AND HIGHER NURSE SATISFACTION**

Equitable nurse-patient assignments play an important role in employee satisfaction. In fact, feeling overworked and unable to effectively manage workload consistently tops the list of factors driving nurse dissatisfaction and turnover. This is quickly followed by feeling a lack of value for contributions and capabilities 1. While the sheer volume of patients can be a challenge, all too often the inequitable nurse case load assignment is the root of the issue.
Just as each patient’s needs are vastly different, so too are the skill sets, aptitudes and preferences of each nurse on staff. Every nurse was selected to be a part of the staff because they bring knowledge and strengths deemed beneficial to the organization. It is important to continuously recognize and utilize these strengths. Doing so not only increases unit productivity, but also keeps nurses satisfied with their role on a daily basis.

By using an acuity system to help understand patient care needs, a nurse manager is better informed to match patients to nurses with specific skills and strengths. Matching nurses with patients that complement their skills and preferences can help improve employee retention by avoiding a number of situations that increase unwanted employee turnover, due to burnout, fatigue, or general dissatisfaction.

For example, it is common for nurses to experience compassion fatigue after having worked a number of complex cases in a row. Similarly, the best or most experienced nurses will often times suffer from burnout after being repeatedly assigned to more than their share of difficult patients because of their experience, while newer nurses feel underutilized and dissatisfied with the lack of opportunity to practice their skills. These types of inequitable assignments most often lead to physical and emotional burnout resulting in high nurse turnover which may contribute to poor patient outcomes. Using an acuity-based system to most accurately help understand patient care needs and easily and consistently achieve equitable assignments boosts employee morale and lessens the cost of turnover for the organization.
MATCHING PATIENT CARE NEEDS TO HELP ACHIEVE BETTER PATIENT OUTCOMES

With the use of acuity-based staffing, both the nurse and the patient benefit. Equitable nurse-patient assignments help achieve a higher likelihood for positive outcomes as a result of accurately balancing patient care needs with nurse workload and skill mix. In a study published in the journal BMJ Quality & Safety in May 2013, researchers observed that higher patient loads were associated with higher hospital readmission rates. Staffing based on acuity would match the nurse skills to what is needed by the patients and help achieve more equitable assignments and better patient outcomes. Consider this common scenario: A patient is admitted into the hospital and diagnosed with pneumonia. The variety of personal and environmental factors impacting the patient requires the nurse to assess the level of care needed. Without an acuity-based system, the assessment is very subjective. In turn, it is impossible to accurately gauge the patient care needs and workload associated with a patient, and assigning the appropriate nurse to the patient becomes more difficult. For example, a 67 year old male with no history of chronic disease and a wife who is a nurse will need a very different level of care than an 87 year old woman who lives alone without any local family. With an evidence-based patient acuity system you have the ability to objectively determine which patients require more direct nursing time than others based on the reported level of care needed.

According to Joint Commission research, “Staffing was found to be a contributing factor in 24% of all unanticipated events resulting in patient death, injury or permanent loss of function.” With recent legislative changes, reimbursement allocations will rely more on patient outcomes. In order to maximize possible revenue and help minimize harm, it is critical to ensure optimal nurse-to-patient matching for the best possible care. Having the right skill mix and nurses with the necessary competencies readily available to take care of the right patient at the right time is essential to help achieve quality of care, patient safety and financial health. Using acuity systems can also help identify trends in patients and care needs in the long run. Doing so can help make nursing assignments consistently more successful and improve patient outcomes.

Another benefit of the objective evaluation of needs is assisting in improved continuity of care. The best acuity systems integrate with staffing and scheduling systems to automatically assign the same clinicians to care for the same patients on a regular basis. Patients can benefit from consistency during their hospital stay, and nurses can take advantage of their chance to learn more about the patient through additional interaction and direct patient care.
**COST SAVINGS**

Cost savings are an important product of optimal patient care matching. Studies show that nurse staffing has a significant impact on quality and financial outcomes. Identifying nurse needs based on patient acuity data can point to a need for more nurses, which can actually save a hospital money by helping improve patient outcomes. Addressing the appropriate staffing needs from acuity data not only has positive financial impacts on care costs, but also addresses the impact of nurse turnover. Since employee turnover can be a costly issue, especially in the healthcare industry, focusing on equitable assignments can increase nurse engagement and return impactful savings. For every 350 RN FTE’s in a nursing personnel budget, a 1% turnover rate can cost the average hospital approximately $300,000 annually. Taking a proactive approach to ensure nurse satisfaction can help you achieve significant savings in the long run.

Acuity-based systems can give you the information you need to assess which patients require more or less nursing time, as well as which nurses are best suited to the patient. Going beyond traditional ratio or guideline staffing, the data derived from these systems can help determine long-term staffing needs based on typical patient populations or other trending needs identified for each specific organization. This level of visibility and efficiency can help eliminate over or understaffing situations in the future. The more you understand your patients, the more accurate your staffing analysis and forecasting can be.

**CONCLUSION**

With the Affordable Care Act now in effect, it is has become increasingly essential that your staff delivers quality care. Under a pay for performance model, having a data-driven acuity system is integral to ensuring the reimbursement dollars are received for quality patient outcomes. Accurately addressing patient needs, and understanding the capacity in which your nursing staff meets the needs of patients is key to help achieve the best patient outcomes for cost savings.

Patient acuity systems can give you the information you need to assess patient needs, as well as the nurses that are best suited to care for the patient. The data derived from patient acuity systems can help determine long-term staffing trends and needs for the future to drive operational efficiencies, help to better patient outcomes and increase employee satisfaction for your healthcare organization.

**ARTICLE SOURCES**

3. http://www.jointcommission.org/assets/1/18/health_care_at_the_crossroads.pdf