



Revolutionizing Care Coordination: How Communication Technology is Changing Skilled Nursing Facilities

A skilled nursing facility nurse is dressing a patient’s complex wound and notices a change in the wound’s condition. In the past, documenting that change and determining next steps required a combination of writing a report, taking a photo that then had to be uploaded and stored and then calling around to find the appropriate health care stakeholder.

Today, the nurse can handle that entire process with a few clicks on the phone, using a HIPAA-complaint app to instantly connect with health care professionals, such as the wound ostomy nurse. The nurse can then determine the appropriate intervention without having to make multiple phone calls or hunt down the right person.

“The ability to use technology to create more efficient workflows and to help fill the gap in being able to communicate seamlessly across the entire continuum of care really helps support staff and lets them know that they are supported,” Dr. Cheryl McKay, nurse executive at TigerConnect, said during a recent webinar with Skilled Nursing News.

As McKay shared, technology is more than just hardware and software. It can be used to provide nurses with the support they need to efficiently do their jobs. Here is a look at three ways that SNFs can use communication technology to create more efficient workflows and improve care delivery.

Better care coordination

Since the pandemic, workers across a range of industries have expressed fatigue and burnout. Perhaps none have had it harder than health care workers, especially in skilled care and post-acute settings, where federal reform initiatives have created new regulatory pressures, and a worsening staffing shortage has exacerbated an already floundering pre-pandemic workforce.

Unlike workers in other fields, health care is a human-to-human industry with limited ability to do remote work.

But while post-pandemic discussions around communication tools have largely revolved around remote work, in-person work comes with its own set of communication challenges.

“A clinical communication (and) collaboration platform can really help bridge that gap in terms of all (workers) being on the same page with a plan of care,” McKay said. As an example, she recalled a large SNF in Northern California that was struggling with its care transition when a patient was discharged from the hospital and received at the SNF. To solve their communication woes, the SNF and its hospital partner began using the same clinical communication platform.

“They were able to ease the stress of those transitions of care and have more effective communications to know when the patient would be there,” McKay said.

Better workflow

For the aforementioned Northern California SNF, while improving communication through a shared platform started as a simple method for care coordination and monitoring a patient’s arrival, there were clinical workflow advantages too. When they needed additional information for the intake coordinator during patient assessment, such as gathering insurance information or simply gaining a better picture of the patient, having a shared communication platform helped with that, too.

It also brought improved regulatory performance.

“All that is very focused work and it is very workflow-oriented,” McKay said. “My team in particular works with staff when we do implementations to really evaluate these workflows from a quality perspective. ... It really improved the starting point with patients because they were off on a good foot and were able to start developing those relationships prior to the actual admission.”

Improved clinical workflows play into every area of skilled care, such as communication with outside care providers, McKay said. The key is making sure that everyone who needs to be on the platform is on the platform.

“Other areas of problems that we see (improved) are communication with pharmacy and the pharmacist, laboratory or radiology ... whether it’s in a desktop environment or a mobile environment, because you can create that network effect and reach all of the providers that you need more readily,” she said. “The second half of that is really human factors. We need to always take into consideration what’s going on when we’re working with technology to create these efficiencies.”

Yet at the same time, the right platform also lets SNFs communicate just with the people they need to rather than an entire group.

“You can see (that a doctor) read my message, so I know he’ll get back with me,” she said. “I don’t have to go through an operator. I don’t have to page and (not) know if I’ll ever get a call back. So that’s closed-loop communication.”

Better care

In the end, improved communication, care coordination and clinical workflows are all in pursuit of one thing: better care. Burnout is a real problem and brings new challenges that impact patient care. Skilled nursing operators know that, and they’re using communication technology and innovation to better support nurses and ultimately to improve care outcomes.

As McKay notes, communication challenges too often pull nurses away from direct care. McKay estimated that nurses today spend only 30% of their time caring for patients, with much of the rest of their time spent trying to connect with people who will enhance or facilitate that care.

“This is especially true of our skilled nursing facilities where many of the doctors aren’t there full-time,” she said. “Many of the specialist staff aren’t there full-time. They go back and forth with other facilities. So using a secure application ... really connects people for better coordination of care. And it just makes it so much easier for staff to find the right person that they need at the right time to have the right conversation with the right information.”



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