Managerial Challenges in Rehabilitation: Developing a Nursing Team for a New Polytrauma Rehabilitation Center

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In 2007 the South Texas Veterans Health Care System in San Antonio, TX, was selected to construct a state-of-the-art rehabilitation center to care for veterans suffering from polytrauma. Polytrauma patients have unique needs because of multiple physical, cognitive, psychological, and psychosocial impairments and functional disabilities. Ground breaking for the new center took place in August 2009 with the anticipated completion of the facility in August 2011.

At the same time that the $66 million facility is being built adjacent to the main hospital, a new team of nurses and restorative aides is also being assembled. The timeline for construction of the facility has a unique and parallel relational timeline with forming, equipping, and training the nursing team.

Phase one was the opening of a 4-bed bridge unit on December 1, 2010, with 10 nurses and eight restorative aides. The challenge of preparing for and opening a 4-bed bridge unit has been difficult because of the time constraints, staggered arrival of new personnel, and opening four patient rooms in borrowed space on an existing acute care unit. The difficulties have been overcome by collaborating with senior nursing and organizational leadership and guidance from the chief of service, as well as professionalism and good humor on the part of the staff. In 3 short months, the basic structure of our team has been built, with a new nurse manager, eight nurses, and eight restorative aides hired and oriented to the system and taught about rehabilitation nursing. At the same time, the physical structure for the polytrauma building is also in the "basic structure" phase—building walls, installing electrical and plumbing, and finalizing details on layout.

We have had an interesting time with the first cohort of staff. The new nurses and aides have various and diverse backgrounds ranging from critical care nurse to paramedic, operating room nurse to special operations military medic, and acute care neurological nurse to certified nursing assistant. Although no one has prior rehabilitation nursing experience, the combination of the diversified backgrounds has yielded a very talented team to care for the polytrauma patient's unique needs. The new staff members are also new to the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) facility in San Antonio, which has added to the challenge. Without exception, each person has a strong desire to be part of the VA's polytrauma rehabilitation program.
Phase two will be an expansion to eight beds in the spring of 2011. To support the expansion, the nursing staff will add 12 registered nurses and eight restorative aides, and while interviews are beginning for the second cohort of staff, the windows are being installed in the new polytrauma rehabilitation building, and the bricks are going up on the outside.

The final phase of our polytrauma rehabilitation center will be a transition to the new 12-bed inpatient unit in the new facility in late summer 2011. Our full nursing team will be in place and knowledgeable and skillful in rehabilitation nursing when the physical building is completed.

Logistics for opening a 4-bed unit is, in many ways, as difficult as opening a large unit. As well as building a nursing team, we are also building an interprofessional team. Therapy staff has participated in orientation of the nursing staff to rehabilitation concepts, and to the notion that rehabilitation involves "team." We have also employed the skills and knowledge of the staff of our sister unit—the Spinal Cord Injury (SCI) Center. We had a lack of polytrauma-specific rehabilitation preceptors, although we will not have SCI patients, our nursing staff spent time in the SCI specialty unit learning rehabilitation concepts from the experienced SCI rehabilitation nurses.

Dr. Don Kautz's keynote speech from the 2010 ARN Annual Educational Conference served as inspiration and illustration of the essence of a rehabilitation nurse. Several nurses have joined ARN during their orientation. The unit currently tracks the staff’s percent completion rate of ARN's Competency Assessment Tool (CAT). For nurses and nurse managers new to rehabilitation nursing, the ARN CAT has been a fantastic educational and assessment tool. The topics address the essentials of patient care in a rehabilitation setting.

Several of the staff have been able to tour the new building and see the blueprints, and to participate in some of the fine tuning as the building progresses. The tour gave us a view of the future as both the building and the nursing team are being built "from scratch." The collective enthusiasm of the mission and the new environment continues to be a source of energy and pride. The journey to the new destination is exciting and rewarding for those involved. As construction nears completion, the staff will continue to gain knowledge, skills, and valuable rehabilitation experience. The veterans who have served and sacrificed for our nation, especially the ones who have sustained injury while in harm's way, will get the very best care in a beautiful setting here in San Antonio.

We thank our veterans for their service, and we thank ARN for supporting us through membership benefits, educational offerings, and products as we develop the VA’s fifth Polytrauma Rehabilitation Center in the nation.