

# HEALTHCARE EXECUTIVE

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## Corporate Partnerships



Ellen G. Lonsler

## Leveraging Your Nursing Resources

*Labor-saving devices can help create a safe and effective work environment.*

Healthcare providers, medical faculty, policymakers, and other groups are collaborating to develop short- and long-term strategies that will alleviate our nation's nursing crisis. Healthcare supplier organizations also play a role, particularly when it comes to implementing solutions. "As a supplier to the healthcare field, we focus on ways we can partner with our customers to provide high-quality patient care within the context of the staffing situation that exists today," says Marshall Dahneke, vice president, Marketing, at Hill-Rom, a Batesville, Ind., company that offers products, clinical process improvements, and other value-added services to healthcare providers. In fact, Hill-Rom and companies like it are developing new ways to change the work environment and help nurses provide care more effectively.

### Freeing Nurses' Time

Several recent studies have shown that much of an RN's time is spent charting or gathering equipment and data, or on more general activities that support the overall care process—such as attending meetings or stocking supplies—but cannot be tied back to specific patients. "When nurses are in such high demand, having them spend time on any activities that do not directly con-

tribute to patient care seems wasteful," Dahneke says.

Looking for ways to reduce the time nurses spend on non-value-added activities, Hill-Rom conducted its own in-depth research of acute care organizations across the country. In its analysis, Hill-Rom categorized 52 types of direct and indirect nursing activities and broke each activity into subcomponents. For example, transferring patients from surface to surface—a direct care activity—involves several steps, such as finding other caregivers to help, locating necessary transfer equipment, rearranging room equipment, and performing the actual transfer. For each activity and its components, the company identified the frequency, duration, and number of personnel needed to complete each task along with its corresponding risk factors. In summary, Hill-Rom found that in the acute care settings studied, roughly 85 percent of time spent by nurses was on activities—both direct and indirect—that did not directly move the patient along the care path.

"If providers are experiencing a shortage of caregivers and their goal is to move their patients through the care path and home, they should look for ways to leverage their scarce caregiver resources," Dahneke says. "One way to do this is

to look for ways to substitute capital equipment for labor." Many new devices, such as handheld technology for charting, lessen the administrative burden that consumes so much of nurses' time. Other tools can minimize unnecessary manual labor by streamlining processes for nurses. For example, in Hill-Rom's analysis, 60 percent of the identified nursing care activities involved a "searching" component. "Among the various activities we identified, we found that nurses spend a lot of time simply looking for things, be it equipment, supplies, or people," says Mike Ramsey, marketing director at Hill-Rom. "We wanted to come up with a solution that would facilitate that process so that nurses wouldn't have to spend so much of their time going from closet to closet or room to room trying to locate the items or people they need." To that end, Hill-Rom developed an infrared sensor system to help healthcare organizations keep track of key equipment and people. A centralized digital communications system monitors unique tags that are placed on equipment and staff so that caregivers can locate who and what they need by pushing a button, rather than searching the unit. "It's about increasing the overall efficiency of nursing practice and freeing nurses' time so that they can focus on delivering care," Ramsey says.

### Reducing Work-Related Injuries

While new technology can expand the caregiving capabilities of nurses, it can also help increase nursing staff safety. Nurses frequently sustain injuries when transferring patients from beds to stretchers or chairs, assisting them to standing positions, or repositioning them in beds. The Bureau of Labor

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Statistics indicates that nearly 80 percent of all claims filed by hospitals for back and shoulder injuries are related to patient-handling tasks.

"Even if there were an unlimited supply of human resources, the risks to the actual caregivers are substantial," Ramsey says. "According to a study in the *Western Journal of Nursing Research*, 12 percent of nurses are considering leaving the profession because of the high injury rate. And as the nursing population ages, the inherent physical difficulties that are associated with giving patient care will become more of an issue. If you can help older nurses so that they can continue to do their work, you'll have a bigger labor pool."

Manufacturers are developing equipment that eliminates the physical—and often dangerous—aspects of patient care. Getting patients up is a critical part of the healing process, and most physicians routinely prescribe an "up in chair" order to minimize respiratory and other problems that result from remaining in one position for too long. Recently introduced ergonomic beds can be automatically reconfigured into a full chair position with the press of a button, requiring only one caregiver to spend a few minutes versus multiple caregivers spending much more time. In addition to caregiver efficiency and safety benefits, devices that assist in this endeavor are often more comfortable

for patients since they eliminate the tugging, pulling, and lifting that manual handling involves—and thus may increase patient compliance. The net effect of these benefits could increase overall care path compliance. And if compliance improves, the potential for improved outcomes also rises.

Solving today's nursing crisis will not be quick or easy. But continuous efforts from all parts of the healthcare field—providers and suppliers alike—can help create an environment that retains current staff and attracts new recruits.

*Ellen G. Lasser is a senior editor for Healthcare Executive.*