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Do You Need a Nurse Practitioner?

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Perhaps the real question is this- How can you accurately gauge your practice's needs and determine if a nurse practitioner is a good fit? With approximately 159,000 nurse practitioners in practice, is this the right resource for you to enhance practice operations and finances, as well as patient care and satisfaction?

The answer can only be found by taking a good hard look at your practice in all areas. There are several areas of focus where bringing in a nurse practitioner may bring the most benefit.

Patient Access

The problem: Unrealistic scheduling, annual epidemics, working patients and an increase in 'I want to be seen now' attitudes are all likely adding to longer-than-wanted wait times and difficulty fitting every patient in. Add to this the potential rush of newly insured patients (thank you healthcare reform!) and the ability to control your practice schedule to your advantage may soon fly out the window.

What to do: Analyze your current scheduling schematic, keep track of patient wait times, both in the office and for appointments, and poll your patient base regarding their work, school or other scheduling conflicts. Look for any patterns in the flow of patients into and through the practice to determine what's holding up patient care. Things to look for include how emergency or acute care issues are fit into the schedule and which providers have a disproportionate amount of routine visits, or even a larger amount of the practice patient base on whole in comparison to other providers.

How a NP can help: Several studies have highlighted how effective the addition of a nurse practitioner can be on reducing wait times and access to the practice. A large part of this results from the ability to maneuver specific sub-sets of patient visits onto the NP schedule. For example, rather than leave two ten minute slots open each hour on a physician's schedule for same-day or acute visits, open the NP schedule up so that a large portion of time is dedicated solely to this need throughout the day. Or, utilize your NP for wellness management, with exclusive scheduling of routine physicals or maintenance appointments. Adjust the flow of patients throughout the day by opening up late afternoon or evening appointments to accommodate the schedules of patients that simply cannot make it in during regular business hours. The availability of a competent nurse practitioner enhances patient access, which increases patient satisfaction in a fiscally sound way, as current NP salaries are well below standard physician rates.

Patient Care

The problem: The recent shift towards wellness management and away from acute episode care demands that patients move right along with their physicians. But, apathy towards change and economic hardships prevent many patients from making that move. In addition, evidence based medicine guidelines are ever-evolving, and physician and staff training in the practice may be less than satisfactory for keeping current and keeping up with essential skills for patient care. Not to mention, physician schedules are cramped for time and patients may be rushed through the door (see Patient Access above!).

What to do: Conduct a mini time-flow study to determine actual visit times for all types of visits at your practice. Most importantly, be sure to capture the time for tasks occurring within the visits- how much time is actually being dedicated towards patient evaluation, how much towards education? Then, track follow-up activities such as patient calls and results tracking. Can your practice say that the time dedicated towards patient care and education has truly made a difference in the health and well-being of your patients? Also, is your practice closely following your SOPs that have been detailed on continuing education and training? Does your practice have such SOPs?

How a NP can help: If there is any area that nurse practitioners excel in most, it is in the area of patient care. They combine the patient-centric attitudes of trained registered nurses, with enhanced clinical education for advanced practice. Utilizing an NP for care management and patient education will likely boost patient compliance rates and do much to decrease acute care episodes in those patients that have been unmotivated to take the necessary steps. A nurse practitioner may also have more time to reach out into the community to field those resources which can help your patients achieve health care goals during times of financial hardship, or to host open invite education sessions on selected topics. Recall activities currently managed by nursing or clerical staff can be overseen by the NP to ensure that all EBM activities are followed through, such as immunizations or spirometry testing, and staff training spearheaded by a nurse practitioner can be clinically focused and consistent to help medical assistants and nursing staff ensure they are providing the safest care possible during triage and procedures. Many a nurse practitioner has also been able to bring some order to physician provider meetings as well….

Revenue Enhancement

The problem: Poor reimbursement, competition for patients, inaccurate coding….the list of financial difficulties for the physician practice goes on and on.

What to do: When deciding whether to bring a nurse practitioner on board, a good place to start is by analyzing your practice's growth over the last two years. How many patients have come into the practice and how many have transferred or aged out? If you are a specialty practice, what is the most common diagnosis for incoming patients? Is your growth (or lack thereof) related to managed care referrals, marketing efforts or other? To determine growth and growth potential, you also have to look out into the community- who are your competitors, is there an ethnic influx into your community, etc. Know who's available and figure out why they aren't already in your practice.

Be sure to check your managed care contracts as well before deciding on hiring an NP. Know with certainty whether or not this new provider will be covered and reimbursed accordingly.

How a NP can help: As discussed previously, patient access and patient care are vital, and are tightly wound up in the financial success of your practice. Once you have patient access and patient care in place, you now have the ability to reach out for more patients. More patients = more visits and procedures, which = increased revenue. Use a nurse practitioner to your advantage and endear yourself to a new demographic, such as adolescent females or a minority population. Combat the potential, or actual, exodus of acute care visits to retail and urgent care clinics by advertising walk-in hours and flexible schedules. And, if your practice is located in one of the many states that allow nurse practitioners to practice independently, then consider opening a satellite office with your NP as the anchor. A new location with a caring, dedicated provider may be just what the doctor ordered for increasing stagnant patient rolls.

Nurse practitioners today are well trained and highly coveted by the practices that employ them. While hiring an NP may not be the right answer for your practice, a close look at your specific needs just may reveal that this oft-used resource is a viable option for practice success.