

Nurses Following Patients Home

by Mary Bryant

You're sick, very sick. A nurse stands near your bed, preparing to administer an advanced drug treatment. After she leaves, a nurse's aide will check on your condition, take your vitals, change your bedding and fluff your pillow. You rest better knowing that help is only a call away. You also rest better because you are in your own bed at home.

Doctors generally agree patients sleep better and recuperate faster when they receive care at home instead of an acute care hospital. However, physicians have faced a lack of qualified nursing care in the home health industry and a reluctance of

deliver care as the leading causes of increasing costs, many hospital managers acknowledge home health care is quickly becoming an integral part of a hospital organization.

A New Model in Care

"Almost five years ago, I was on a panel talking about case management," said Elinor Littman, Director of Watsonville Community Hospital's Prime Health at Home. "There was someone on the panel with me from South Carolina. ... [There was] this big hospital in South Carolina [where managers] found that there was difficulty in discharging patients home who were on IVs. ... [Hospital managers] made a proposal to the state that they put together a team of four nurses specifically to do home infusion, and they [would] rotate them through one week in home care, [then] three weeks at the hospital."

As Littman was discussing the idea of introducing home health care opportunities to local hospital nurses, four nurses from the South County's acute care facility's critical care unit approached Littman with the idea of adopting a rotating schedule employing nurses from the hospital's critical care unit.

"The idea was a transition for the patient. Ideally, we would like those nurses to continue to work in both worlds. Even though hospital lengths of stay are going to go down, patients will continue to be in the hospital," said Littman. "We have been trying to figure out the logistics of a similar program at Dominican."

Littman said that critical care nurses were not the only nurses following patients home to administer care.

"We now have a similar program for our obstetrics patients," Littman said. "At Watsonville Hospital, all patients get a visit. ... We have [home

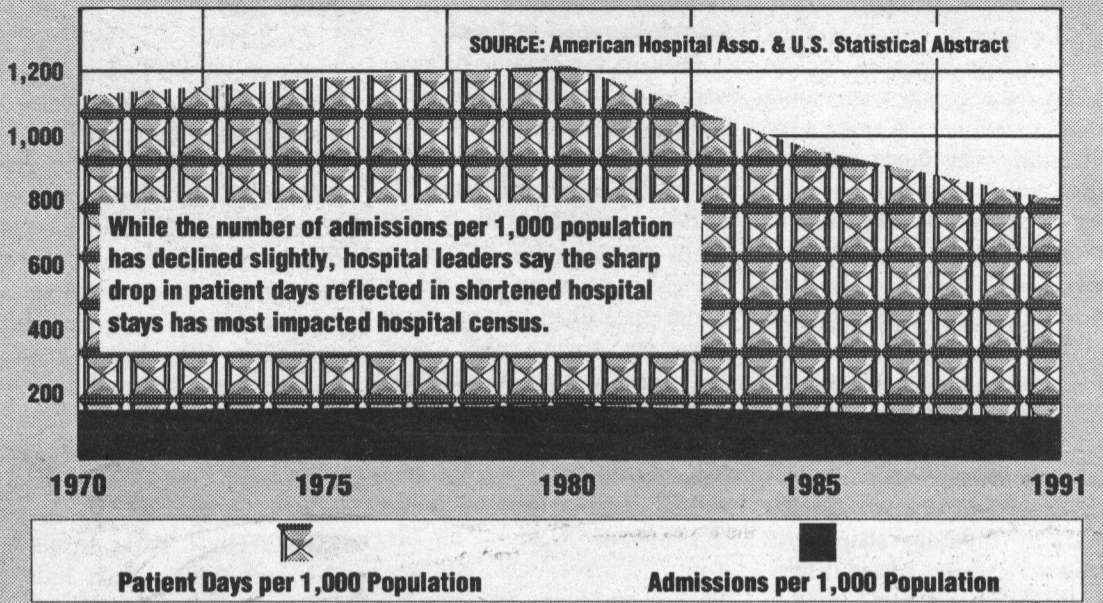


Elinor Littman, Director of Watsonville Community Hospital's Prime Health at Home

insurance providers to allow patients to remain in the home setting. These are hurdles that are dropping about as quick as the average cost of a day's stay in hospital has climbed.

While hospital administrators point to the cost of purchasing technology and employing highly trained staff to

Hospitals Pinched by Declining Census Patient Days and Admissions per 1,000 by Year



health] nurses who formally worked in the hospital and who go into the hospital and meet the mothers before they're discharged, and then visit them within 72 hours after discharged."

Littman said that in North County, some of the agency's nurses are drawn from the staff at Dominican Hospital.

Tighter Budgets

Littman said one of the challenges facing home health agency managers was the cutbacks in reimbursement from Medicare, the massive federal program that provides health coverage for the nation's adults over the age of 64, an age group that represents the largest group of users of home health accounting for about 94 percent of the local visits in 1992.

"For us, there were decreases. As a hospital based agency in MediCare, we had a significant decrease this year," Littman said. "We're looking at how we can make our management structure more efficient and leaner. ... We are seeing what opportunities there are for primary nurses to supervise home health aides, and work on a team with them."

Littman said that her agency was also computerizing schedules to make operations more efficient.

However, despite tighter budgets, demand is up. The county's two leading home health agencies, Visiting Nurses Association of Santa Cruz County and Prime Health at Home made 60,017 calls to see patients at home. While a relatively new program, Prime Health at Home has made a significant impact in the market.

The South County based hospital, owned and operated by Watsonville Community Hospital, recorded 19,936 visits in 1992, according to state records.

New Future for Hospital Nurses

In most cases, after completing a two-year program, nurses have gone to work in hospitals, usually affiliating

with a single department. Emergency room nurses work in the emergency department, critical care nurses attend patients in critical care, and so on. With each department, there is individualized training necessary to help cope with the demands of the job.

"Home health care is not for everyone. There is no one else there to confer with or ask when you need that consultation," Littman said. "It is a different kind of family practice."

However, with continuing declines being posted in hospital stays throughout the nation, it is likely more hospital nurses will more regularly follow their patients home. □

State Statistics Show That Patients Are Receiving More Care in Their Homes

