Forging the Future of Staffing Based on Evidence

EVERY DAY, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, 365 days a year, worldwide, health care teams are being organized to deliver patient care to people in need. We call this process staffing. In clinically advanced venues, the process is driven by informed decision makers who consider evidence, best practices, human factors research, the conclusions of analytical risk management, and real-time clinical situations. Patients and staff experience the best we have to offer in these cultures of evidence-driven staffing practices that support our quality and patient safety agendas. Unfortunately, it can be said that staffing processes based on evidence are less common than anyone of us want to consider.

Staffing was once thought of as a back office, clerical function. We now know better. Staffing is now recognized as deeply complex and highly dynamic, and can be linked to every key concern in the business of health care: financial performance, efficiency of care delivery, quality and safety, excellence in outcomes for patients, and the strength, safety, and stability of our workforce. Peter Buerhaus, PhD, RN, FAAN, believes the world of nurse staffing is one of the more complicated challenges of our time (see page 169). This is a challenge we must face head-on. Effective staffing plays a central role in the success of both individual health care organizations and our nation’s overall ability to care for our population. This, in combination with the very unique and turbulent times we are experiencing in health care, makes focused attention on staffing both timely and essential.

The last few years have seen an increase in articles and research published on staffing as well as advancements in technologies developed to integrate evidence into staffing methodologies. As a result, we can begin to raise the bar and provide safer care to our patients, create better environments for our caregivers, and improve performance for our organizations by making the move from staffing based on opinion to staffing based on evidence.

In formulating this special issue of Nursing Economic$ devoted to the topic of health care staffing, we wanted to draw from a range of relevant topics, experts, and points of view. This was not easy as there are many skilled thought leaders, innovators, and researchers working on this topic. We could have filled a book! So while this is not intended to be comprehensive, it is our hope the selections herein are thought provoking, stretch our thinking, and identify some actions that can be taken to integrate this information into everyday practice.

Within these pages we deal with innovations and also issues that are barriers to achieving effective staffing. We will be reminded that unless we clearly understand the role of the professional nurse, we will never be able to optimize use of our talented caregivers. We will see how sophisticated technology is becoming available and hear from some thought leaders in our vendor community as they share their point of view on how technology can be successfully adopted to accelerate the path to staffing that is based on evidence. Examples from hospital operations with remarkable outcomes will offer practical steps to replicate these outcomes. The nurse economist’s point of view will stimulate our left brain while this issue also considers a new focus on the potential impact of a caregiver’s capacity to be “caring” that may well trigger lively conversation.

The board and editor of Nursing Economic$ have made a commitment to help facilitate the adoption of effective staffing based on evidence. The “Staffing Unleashed” column edited by Kathy Douglas, MHA, continued on page 167

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RN, is one example, as well as this special issue. In addition, plans are underway for a session on the “State of the Science of Staffing that Is Evidence Based” at the 2012 Nursing Economic$ Summit, June 6-8 in Washington, DC. Kathy and Karlene want to thank Nursing Economic$ for their ongoing commitment and for dedicating this entire issue to nurse staffing which reflects its relevancy and importance to care delivery and professional practice.

All in all, it is our hope this issue will inspire health care leaders to make staffing a top strategic priority. We must be open to new ideas, but beyond that we must demand innovation and expanded research on staffing so we can advance our ability to assure a future in which we have a strong and motivated workforce capable of providing safe and high-quality care for patients at a price we can afford. $