Using IT to Improve Clinical Teamwork and Communication

**Executive Summary**
- Reports from the Institute of Medicine strongly encourage the use of technology to improve clinical teamwork and workflow, thereby improving patient safety.
- New clinical information tools are enabling workflow changes that make it easier for clinical professionals to work together, communicate, and share their professional expertise.
- This in turn creates opportunities to provide safer, more patient-focused care.

**Causes**
Effective communication among care team members is not easy to accomplish. Although all clinical disciplines rely upon each other while providing care to patients, the specific care processes, customary interactions, and professional hierarchy usually in place do not facilitate a team approach to care. Much of this originates with professional training. Professionals in different disciplines train in separate environments with little opportunity to develop a foundation for smoothly working with professionals from other disciplines. The traditional curricula for these disciplines typically does not include critical team and communication skills.

In addition, traditional paper-based processes only reinforce the communication silos between members of the multidisciplinary care team. Members of each discipline document their patient findings in separate sections of the chart when they have the time to enter them, which is often at the end of the shift or — at best — an hour or two after the fact. This makes it difficult for an individual clinician to locate and synthesize critical patient data. Often the clinician needs to review information from prior patient visits, which presents even more challenges. Much physician and nurse time is devoted to searching for patient data and communicating the findings, a terrible use of professional time.

Clinical team members constantly struggle to use the latest patient data when making care decisions. This inefficiency in the workflow presents inherent opportunities for errors and missteps.

**Information Technology Tools for Transforming Clinical Processes**
Fortunately, the introduction of new clinical information technology tools is breaking down some of these communication barriers. These new clinical tools are enabling workflow changes that make it easier for clinical professionals to work together, communicate, and share their professional expertise. This in turn creates opportunities to provide safer, more patient-focused care.

For example, by using a clinical documentation system, clinicians complete charting in real time at the point of care in a way that complements their workflow. Information automatically posts to the multidisciplinary record of care so it is instantly available to all care team members. In addition, key patient data are available for clinical decision support during the ordering process.

Integration with ancillary department systems,
are presented to the nurse at the point of care during the time of medication administration. This process, using clinical information technology, builds a continuous thread of communication and intent from the physician’s order through the nurse’s administration of a medication.

Benefits of Improving Care Team Processes

Improving processes and enhancing communication provide clear benefits. Physicians, nurses, pharmacists and others can now focus on activities that truly affect patient care rather than those that are associated with clinical or administrative rework. Clinicians have immediate access to all the information they need to make patient care decisions, regardless of their setting. Physicians receive fewer calls requesting clarification of orders. Nurses spend less time interpreting, debating, and clarifying orders, and more time providing patient care. Pharmacists devote less time interpreting physician intent and more time assisting physicians in developing effective pharmaceutical treatment. Lastly, more efficient communication can help patients get better faster. Delays in care delivery can negatively affect recovery time, length of stay, and overall treatment costs.

As health care organizations deploy clinical information technology tools, careful planning is required to best take advantage of their inherent capabilities. Implementing technology solutions along the lines of current work processes is a plan destined to failure or, at best, maintenance of the status quo. Effective use of these tools requires that the care processes themselves be reviewed and redesigned. This approach helps ensure that the solutions that can deliver the greatest benefits are implemented.

Clinical information technology solutions can significantly enhance teamwork among clinical professionals by improving information transfer, workflow, and communication, resulting in marked improvements in patient safety and overall quality of care.

ADDITIONAL READINGS
