STAFFING TRENDS

Hospitalists fill important new staffing niche

Managed care has dramatically altered the medical staffing equation, increasing the importance of primary care (PC) physicians, expanding the role of physician extenders, and changing the way physicians are compensated.

Market forces have created the need for a new type of medical specialty: The hospitalist. Hospitalists perform a specialized task, taking care of patients exclusively in a hospital setting. Not to be confused with intensives—who are also hospital based, but tend to the very ill in ICUs—hospitalists manage the overall inpatient census.

Market forces have created a need for the hospitalist, a new medical specialty.

These physicians, currently estimated at about 1,500 in number, are playing an increasingly important role in healthcare delivery for various reasons, including:

- **Quality of care.** A hospitalist knows everything about the hospital. This includes how long a test should take, who the best nurses are, what the hospital does well, and when a patient should be transferred. This knowledge, coupled with the hospitalist’s skill on inpatient work, can result in a higher quality of care.

- **Cost containment.** Closer patient monitoring and enhanced care can lead to shorter hospital stays and quicker discharges. In addition, hospitalists have a better notion of how much tests, supplies, and equipment cost, enabling them to utilize hospital resources more efficiently. Hospitalists therefore can play a key role for integrated delivery systems that include medical groups with at-risk contracts.

- **Patient satisfaction.** Although patients are not being treated by their family physician, they understand that they are getting more physician time and more continuity of care. Gone is the frustration of waiting all day for their physician. Patient satisfaction may improve as a result.

- **Quality of life.** Medical groups may employ a hospitalist to enhance quality of life for group members by eliminating daytime call. Those hospitalists or groups that establish a hospitalist team for 24-hour coverage can eliminate the call for existing physicians completely. This also can enhance the group’s position when recruiting new associates.

- **Physician satisfaction.** Group physicians who no longer have to run back and forth to the hospital can focus on building their patient base and adding physicians or physician extenders if necessary.

Healthcare organizations recruiting hospitalists have three groups to choose from: internists, intensivists, and physicians currently practicing as hospitalists.

Hospitalists can help with their colleagues’ workload. Group physicians may not have to run back and forth to the hospital, and instead can focus their time on building a patient base.

Because the field is so new, there are no average income figures for hospitalists, but generally their pay is competitive with general internists. However, hospitalists often are offered a premium of $20,000 to $40,000 above what an internist would be paid, since hospitalists have no mechanism for earning bonuses. Unlike internists, who can build a large patient base and earn extra income, hospitalists can only see the patients who are sent to them.

For example, a recent hospitalist recruitment effort conducted by Merritt, Hawkins & Associates featured a $170,000 salary for a Florida based practitioner, a figure about $30,000 higher than a general internist would have been offered. However, hospitalists generally are viewed as a good investment, since hospitals can bill for their services, and because they can inhibit costs.

Hospitalists can be a challenge to recruit because the specialty is so new and requires physicians with an inpatient bent. Hospitalist practice does have appeal, however, since it is considered the “ER of primary care” because of the set schedule involved.

Although they are still something of a curiosity, it seems clear that hospitalists will be a medical staffing fixture in the next century.