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For Your Health's Sake

Solutions For Expediting Patient Care

(Huntsville, TX) –You have just been admitted to a hospital as an “observation” patient. What does that mean? Observation admission to a hospital is a status to evaluate and treat a patient's medical condition to determine whether there is a need for an inpatient stay. It is generally reserved for those patients whose medical problems do not meet inpatient criteria as defined by the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services.

This evaluation is usually done in a period of 24 hours so that a diagnosis can be made or the patient can be triaged appropriately. Our health care system has a growing number of patients who are relying on Medicare and Medicaid for their insurance. It is because of this that strict adherence to Medicare criteria be heeded so that the hospital can be properly reimbursed. This might not be a problem, except that observation patients are often in the hospital longer than 24 hours and frequently longer than 48 hours.

In the early 1970s there were increasing numbers of patients with government-based insurance. As more hospitals were getting their claims denied it became obvious that methods needed to be developed to expedite patient care.

Older methods of determining inpatient and outpatient criteria were noted to have many logistical shortcomings. The InterQual[R] criteria eventually grew to become one of the standards for hospital admission and discharge criteria. The important point is not that InterQual[R] criteria are followed but that there is a staff capable of enforcing them. One recommendation is that hospitals have case management services available 24 hours a day and seven days a week so that the criteria are not neglected on weekends or holidays.

Huntsville Memorial Hospital has this recommendation covered. Our Case Management staff is a valuable resource that is available to our patients and staff 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, 365 days a year. Many people think that case managers are discharge planners, and that the only time a patient needs a case manager is when he or she has discharge needs. Case management is much more than that. It is important that we make sure that, not only do patients and families know what case management is, but that the nursing staff members know also.

Case managers work in forces behind the scenes, much like the crowd of people in the Verizon commercials. Case management is a hidden resource for patients. Often, the case managers work in the trenches, with their heads in charts, communicating with an interdisciplinary team of healthcare professionals to make sure that the patient is moving

smoothly through the continuum of care, and that there are no delays or detours in their care. This is usually an unknown aspect of case management.

Hospital personnel and the public need to be aware that case managers are advocates for all patients; they ensure that their healthcare facility and professionals are doing what is truly right for the patient, in the right setting, receiving the most appropriate care, and in the most cost-effective manner. Case management follows the patient's plan of care to make sure that it is appropriate and timely, that their hospital admission status is appropriate, that their discharge planning is initiated, and that goals are set to meet the discharge plan. It is imperative that the case manager build a relationship with the patient and their families in order to reach a mutual goal of discharge.

Another possible approach to decrease the amount of unnecessary admissions and decrease the length of stay in observation would be to produce a special holding unit.

Huntsville Memorial Hospital understands the importance of efficiency and quality of care for our Physicians, especially when they are trying to determine whether a patient needs to be admitted for a hospital stay or discharged. That is why we have developed a Clinical Decision Unit (CDU) on the third floor of our facility.

A CDU is a highly skilled area where patients are evaluated and decisions made about treatment options that are based on frequent and detailed assessments, testing and treatments. The CDU accepts a wide range of diagnoses, from cardiac and respiratory to neurology and urology. The CDU is a short stay unit which patients can expect their length of stay to be between 24 and 48 hours with subsequent placement in either an inpatient bed based on the seriousness of the patient's illness or discharged safely home to follow up with their primary care physician. The CDU is in operation 24 hours a day, seven days a week with highly skilled nursing and technical support. Patients can expect to receive quality care and excellent service by our exceptional staff.

Sally Nelson
Chief Executive Officer
Huntsville Memorial Hospital