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A study of uniforms: the badge is not enough

By Edie Sue Kubicek, RN, BSN



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In the fall of 2009, Mary Lu Gerke, Ph.D., RN, vice-president of nursing/Chief Nursing Officer, at Gundersen Lutheran asked a group of nurses – the Nursing Marketing and Communication Council – to review nursing role identification related to patient safety.

The council embarked on the process to review uniform history of nursing in our organization and throughout the country. The guiding principle throughout this process was to create a culture of patient safety. The primary goals identified were that patients and families would be able to identify the nurses; that health care disciplines would be able to identify the nurses; and that standard nursing attire throughout the system would help patients coming from regional clinics identify nurses on the main campus.

Over the course of the next nine months, the nursing council worked diligently on this project. Five task forces within the council worked on various aspects: project plan, research, policy, attire, and communication. The scope of our project included Registered Nurses (RNs), Licensed Practical Nurses (LPNs), Medical Assistants (MAs) and Technicians (Techs).

A review of evidence showed that patients and families are comfortable and have greater confidence in their care when they can easily identify the professional nurses who are caring for them. There is also evidence that indicates an increase in patient safety when nursing staff are dressed in standardized colors. When patients do not know the role of the staff in scrubs before them, they may with-



The Nursing Marketing and Communication Council reviewed nursing role identification related to patient safety.

hold vital information or they may mistakenly share vital information with a staff member who cannot adequately address the issue. The current usage of the name badge reflecting RN alone is not enough.

It was important to hear feedback from patients and staff directly. The group gained information through interviews with patients and families, review of patient satisfaction surveys, discussion with other facilities who have adopted a similar process, looking at national trends, and seeking feedback through an internal opinion poll from Gundersen Lutheran staff that would be directly affected by the change. Decisions were made by the

council after careful review and discussion of all of these components, and a timeline for announcement and implementation was developed. Careful planning and effective communication on the issue has been critical.

For RNs, white was chosen for the uniform top. This was congruent with what was learned from information-gathering, and was an extremely popular color requested through RN feedback. White is a recognized historic color for nurses, and research showed that overall, patients preferred white for nurses as it represents someone trustworthy and professional. Navy blue was chosen for uniform bottoms. This aligns with the national trend of

RNs in navy, and also showed that the council listened to nurses who asked to wear dark bottoms.

In July, announcements were made on attire selections for RNs and LPNs, with an implementation date of January 1, 2011. This six-month time frame allows an opportunity for staff to financially plan for and purchase new attire. MA and Tech decisions occurred in September, with implementation planned for March.

Communication is a key component for this project. The task force working on communication shared information routinely in various venues, such as:

- System updates in weekly Nursing News STAT, an electronic newsletter sent via e-mail to all RNs
- Gundersen Lutheran's Bridges, a weekly newspaper
- Gundersen Lutheran nursing staff meetings
- Nursing Role Identification/Patient Safety website on the internal nursing website, which kept all information in one place – including a Frequently Asked Questions document, attire grid, corporate communication, and more
- Nursing council meeting minutes available via internal website to all Gundersen Lutheran nurses

This journey exemplifies a process

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to establish best practice in health care today. While the nursing council took the lead, there was consistent support along the way from administration. It has been an emotional journey for nursing, with some early adopters and some still holding on to old ways. What has kept the council strong in its work and decision-making are the fundamental guiding principles of role identification and patient safety. A unified message from the council remains

consistent and they never waived from these guiding principles. This clear and strong direction has helped navigate the uncertainties and difficulties inherent in change.

The primary goals cited in the beginning of this article are within sight. Nurses feel a strong sense of achievement and satisfaction as they know that the patient has always been at the core of this work.

When Teresa Peters, a recent

Gundersen Lutheran patient, heard that nurses would be wearing consistent uniforms, she thought it was a great idea. "I've always thought the mismatched colors and patterns gave an appearance of disorganization," she said. "The new uniforms sound so clean, classy and professional. What a great change for the organization." ■ Edie Sue Kubicek, RN, BSN, is a nursing recruiter – nursing system specialist at Gundersen Lutheran Health System.



Consistent uniforms give an appearance of organization and help patients and their families have more confidence in the staff. These nurses are wearing the new uniforms Gundersen Lutheran nurses will begin wearing in 2011.