The move to a decentralized nursing station

When a hospital’s workflow revolves around a central nursing station, there’s limited information in the bedside chart, and instead of interacting with patients, nurses trek many miles back and forth to their main headquarters to chart and gather essential supplies. This inefficient model not only creates cumbersome access to patient details, it slows response times and limits patient observations.

Advances in information technology have now given rise to smaller, decentralized workstations and charting substations. Instead of having one large, central location containing charts, orders, medications and other supplies, more and more hospitals are opting for several, smaller nursing stations on each floor, integrating them with mobile workstations and/or computers located inside or just outside of patient rooms. Jenny Nielsen, BSN RN at Columbia St. Mary’s in Milwaukee, Wis., uses a computer on wheels as well as the computer located outside of each patient room on the 12-bed burn unit where she works. “I love being able to bring the computer right into a patient’s room with me. The hospital’s paperless system saves me roughly 45 minutes per shift.”

This decentralizing format puts nurses at close range to their patients – enhancing the quality and quantity of care they are able to provide. It’s helping improve patient safety by preventing accidents such as falls while drastically reducing the number of steps a nurse takes each day – decreasing physical strain and fatigue on the nursing staff. This model makes sense, especially when you consider the aging nurse population – in which the average age of today’s nurse is 48.

The electronic medical records (EMR) mandate is another compelling argument for hospitals to adopt a decentralized nursing workflow and incorporate products that make technology accessible throughout the floor. This government mandate forces medical facilities to locate computers right at the source of care – health care facilities failing to abide
may be succumbed to Medicare fund penalties. The Health Information Technology for Economic and Clinical Health (HITECH) Act, which can reimburse hospitals for making medical records accessible electronically, serves as good motivation to make the switch.

Flexible, ergonomically smart products: must-haves in the nursing world

When it comes to developing decentralized work areas, which products offer the most value? The answer is unique to each facility. Products designed to accommodate multiple users in a variety of scenarios while providing comfort and flexible function are most desired in the fast-paced hospital environment. Portable technology solutions that make nursing resources, accessories and equipment easily accessible and in close proximity to patients, while lending necessary EMR support, are in high demand. “Time efficiency is key for nursing staff,” says Jill Jansen, obstetrics nurse, Waukesha, Wis. “An admission would take forever if we didn’t have computers in the room.”

When making product decisions for the nursing station, there are many factors to consider such as hospital layout, workflow, budget and IT resources. Hospitals have important questions to answer, including: where is the hospital experiencing congestion? Where does the workflow break down? What is going to make the workflow more efficient? What infrastructure do rooms currently have in place? Are they wired for this type of technology? Are there data ports, outlets, connections? What in-room resources can be utilized? What quantities are needed to effectively serve the entire staff?

Mobile workstations: an on-the-go nursing station

Mobile workstation technology gives you anytime, anywhere secure computer access – bringing critical, up-to-date patient information right to the bedside. Computers on Wheels or COWs as they are sometimes referred to, can be positioned wherever desired within a room and can be moved from room to room with the caregiver for optimum efficiency. The ability to move a cart throughout a unit offers significant capital savings over wall-mounted options that are restricted to individual patient room use.

The mobile workstation cart makes it easy to administer medications with accuracy and punctuality. Boxfuls of meds can be stored within the cart’s lockable drawer and delivered directly, giving the nurse an opportunity to discuss the process start-to-finish with his or her patient. Medical drawers featuring a removable, compartmentalized insert provide quick and easy retrieval of important supplies such as medications, gloves, syringes and more. The desktop provides additional space for items – a nice feature in cluttered rooms.

Carts come in countless configurations. Before choosing a computer cart system for your hospital, consult nurses for their feedback to see which formats are favored since they will be the primary users of the product. Consider these key factors:

- Size & stability
- Mobility
- Security
- Ergonomics
- Battery life
- Drawer size
- Height-adjusting ease
- Cleaning ease
- Cable management
- LCD monitor mounting method

Battery life can be a major concern with mobile workstations. Cordless systems equipped to operate on battery power for a full eight-hour shift are an efficient option. Lightweight Lithium Iron Phosphate batteries deliver maximum energy, without weighing down carts. This type of battery is fully rechargeable in a short, two-hour time span and has a long life cycle – approximately five years or 8,000 cycles. Look for a station that can easily adjust from a sitting to a standing height position to offer nurses flexibility in how they wish to perform their computer tasks. Some mobile workstations even include attached seating. Workstations featuring height-adjustable
seat and work surfaces enable different users to quickly and easily adapt the station to their preferences.

Monitors with tilt, swivel and rotating capabilities offer flexibility in positioning the screen to practically any angle to cater to specific working needs. Carts that provide theft protection are desirable for securing patient records, medications and equipment. Wrist and palm support is important in providing ergonomic comfort, and cable management areas help hide and organize cords. Lockable casters prevent unwanted movement, and sealed castors make it easy to sanitize the wheels. Potential negatives of mobile workstations include the need to disinfect carts between patient use in certain situations and the possibility of being logged off unintentionally due to computer sensitivity to movement. Sometimes carts are assigned to one specific room, alleviating the need to maneuver through carpeted areas or push around heavier-than-normal carts.

In-room, wall-mounted computer workstations offer point-of-care convenience

Located inside patient rooms, wall-mounted computer stations are a great space-saving solution in both hospital and clinic settings. Ergonomically friendly, the workstation’s components are mounted on a central track for simple adjustment, making it easy to use from a sitting or standing position while accommodating users of varying heights. The position and height of the monitor and keyboard are easy to modify by sliding the equipment up or down the track. Workstations equipped with a swivel feature promote patient interaction by enabling caregivers to openly share test results and other medical information to help patients better understand the next steps in their treatment plan. Designed to get a patient involved in his or her care, these in-room devices create a sense of engagement and partnership, helping nurses and doctors provide an even higher level of service. Keyboard and mouse platform extensions that fold down provide easy storage when not in use, and width-adjustable CPU holders can conform to various-sized units.

Although it relieves staff from pushing around carts, the in-room workstation is not without several drawbacks. Outfitting each room with this kind of technology is a large, upfront capital expense. It can also cause IT headaches in making sure every patient room is up and running at all times, and it may present security issues if guests tamper with the machine. The wall-mounted computer is a sensible solution for rooms of a finite number, such as exam rooms. Fitting flat against the wall, these in-room stations work especially well in the exam room where space is at a premium. It is also important the station be situated as such so that the nurse does not have his or her back to the patient.

Wall desks: handy workstations for any location

These stationary desks can be conveniently located in the hall outside of patient or exam rooms, allowing nurses to do charting and other tasks near their patients. This desk “on-call” provides quick access to a convenient writing space and is a step-saving option that eliminates back-and-forth travel to a central nursing station after every patient visit. The interior storage compartment is the ideal place to keep clipboards, patient binders, medical charts, prescription pads, x-rays, laptop computers, and other supplies close at hand. A fold-down door offers plenty of room for writing, charting, organizing, computing or conducting any activity requiring a flat sturdy work surface at a moment’s notice. Wall desks furnished with a retractable door, magnetic catch, smooth-gliding adjustable stays and an integral handle add further efficiency.

Decentralizing has pros and cons: hybrid model brings balanced approach

The decentralized nursing station provides countless benefits to nurses and their patients. It’s a concept that ups
efficiency and gives nurses more face-time with patients. It simplifies the workflow, improving overall hospital efficiency. When working within the patient zone, nurses save time and are ultimately more responsive to patient needs. With one shared database, every caregiver has access to the same information – lessening the opportunity for errors, such as giving the incorrect dosage of medicine. Products that support decentralization enable info to be shared quickly and efficiently. What many nurses now consider “vital” on their units, these hands-on systems permit nursing staff to care for and observe the patient while doing necessary charting – creating an environment where tasks and documentation can be completed in the most efficient manner possible. When emergent issues arise, charting can be done on the spot, decreasing the chance for errors in documentation.

“You get more work done in a decentralized model,” admits Nielsen. “When you have a bunch of nurses together, there’s more chatting, etc. But there’s also a downside to this because you miss the opportunity to talk things over with other nurses and gain insight into particular issues.” Nursing is a team effort. When nurses are able to congregate throughout their shift, they can share any patient concerns they might have. “If you’re segregated to charting inside or directly outside patient rooms, you lose some of that communication,” notes Jansen. “As a result, you may be less aware about what is going on in the rest of the unit, and that can be problematic.”

Complete decentralization of the nursing station is hardly a plausible option. It’s a nurse’s “home base” – a place to store a beverage and have conversations out of earshot from patients and their family. It’s also a hub for doctors to speak with nurses and other staff, a place to hold impromptu meetings and provide mentoring while also serving as a resource center. The fact is that nurses on certain units are not always busy, especially during the nighttime. Without a nursing station, where would they go? Staffed by a unit clerk, the nursing station may also act as a point of contact for visitors. Nursing stations contain necessary equipment and supplies like fax machines, copiers, printers, envelopes, transportation forms and other kinds of paperwork. Even though many things are carried out electronically, certain tasks still need to be done on paper.

Collaboration and social interaction in the medical setting remains an important requirement. How do you maintain strong working relationships and peer rapport that are more common in a centralized nursing station? When nurses are limited to working solely with carts and in-room computer systems, interaction with their peers is significantly reduced. A hybrid model containing one or two main nursing stations plus multiple individual caregiver stations throughout, can help avoid isolation on the unit, giving nurses a chance to communicate with co-workers, while still remaining close to their patients.

**Selecting the right vendor**

When looking to implement products that support a decentralized workflow, healthcare and medical industry professionals should partner with a vendor that can comfortably facilitate the entire process – from interior space planning and equipment selection to delivery and installation. Equipment and accessories designed with a focus on safety and efficiency will help improve patient, staff and resource outcomes. Therefore, find a vendor that carries a wide variety of affordable, durable, healthcare-grade products from reputable brands. The ability to ship in a reasonable timeframe is another benefit to be on the lookout for. A company that provides all of these services, coupled with dedicated customer care, helps save valuable time and money in a demanding healthcare environment.

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**REFERENCES**