

## In Focus Taking the Grave out of "Graveyard Shift"

A trend is occurring in hospital care that may influence patients' chances of surviving hospitalization. Unfortunately, most patients aren't aware of the issue and don't know how to do anything about it.

It is well documented that patients suffer higher rates of death, complications and medical errors when they are treated at night and on weekends. "People get sick 24 hours a day, but there is a stark discrepancy in the quality of care on nights and weekends" when 50% to 70% of patients may be admitted, says David Shulkin, chief executive of New York's Beth Israel Medical Center. A study of 62,814 heart-attack patients that was recently published in *Circulation* shows:

- 1 More than half of the patients arrived off hours.
- 1 The group arriving off hours was 66% less likely than patients arriving during the day to get an angioplasty (a procedure in which a balloon is used to open a blockage in a coronary) within the 90-minute window recommended by the American Heart Association.

Some hospitals have decided to take action by hiring health care providers who work only night shifts and implementing policies to improve communications during changes between the day and night shifts.

"Hospitalists", who work as full-time hospital staff with no outside patients, began to appear about ten years ago, but are rapidly becoming much more widely used. Hospitalists are focused exclusively on managing inpatient care. "Intensivists" are hospital staff with special training in intensive care. Today, many primary care physicians use hospitalists to care for their patients when they are in the hospital.

Numerous studies have shown the use of hospitalists improves quality of care. In fact, the use of intensivists is one of four quality and safety practices evaluated by the Leapfrog Group's Hospital Quality and Safety Survey. About 30% of the hospitals in northeast Ohio that responded to the Leapfrog survey in 2006 utilized intensivists for all intensive care unit patients.

Now a new type of hospitalist, called a "nocturnist" who works only night shifts, is being added to hospital staffs. In 2007, about 1,200 hospitals had at least one nocturnist or a hospitalist who shared night shifts, compared with about 700 in 2003. Nocturnists currently account for only 6% of all hospitalists in the United States. However, demand for these doctors is increasing. Some hospitals provide higher salaries and shorter work hours to attract nocturnists.

Hospitals with nocturnists are able to admit and initiate the care of all medical admissions for the inpatient services. By contrast, doctors "on call" at home usually provide new inpatients brief "holding orders" and have the patient wait until the next day before being seen in person by the "day" doctor. Even if nurses page a sleeping doctor, it may take an hour or more until a patient is seen.

According to Aman D. Sabharwal, MD, a nocturnist at University of Miami, Jackson Memorial Hospital, "Having a nocturnist in the hospital throughout the night allows for a more precise and accurate physical exam, formulation of an impression, and execution of a treatment plan. Physicians who are on-call at home often do not get the complete or correct story from the Emergency Department (ED), which can lead to incomplete admission orders and delayed treatment plans." When Jackson Memorial Hospital instituted a nocturnist program, it experienced great improvements in ED throughput, inpatient bed utilization, patient satisfaction, average length of stay (both in the ED and inpatient), and quality of care.

So, how do enlightened consumers find out which hospitals have nocturnists? We attempted to contact four area hospitals. We were successful in getting an answer from three of the four. Unfortunately, it isn't always easy to get the correct answer. We started by asking hospitals if they have "nocturnists" on staff. This approach didn't work. Most people are not familiar with the term. To get to the right answer we had to ask, "Do you have hospitalist physicians on staff 24 hours per day and we don't mean 'on call' or in the emergency department?" We got an answer of "yes" from two of the three via the phone and from the third via its website. We invested a lot of phone calls into the fourth hospital.

### What should you do?

Investigate the hospitals that your employees use to determine if they have nocturnists and let your employees know the results.

Otherwise, encourage your employees to:

- Find out if the hospital where they will be admitted has hospitalists that work at night that treat *inpatients* (not patients that have just been admitted to the emergency room). They can either ask their doctor or contact the hospital directly.
- If the hospital where they will be admitted does not have staff doctors in the evenings, they should ask their doctor how care will be provided if problems arise at night.
- Keep contact information for their doctor after hours.
- Keep a copy of their medical history and medication list with them.
- Demand the same quality of care after hours as they would during the day by persistently asking for what they need and not accepting "no" for an answer. Ask to speak to a supervisor, if necessary.

### Did You Know?

Senator Ron Wyden, Dem. Oregon, and principal architect of the proposed Healthy Americans Act, in a speech to healthcare industry leaders: "If your profession decides, as it did in 1993 and 1994, to go out and spend millions of dollars fighting to preserve the status quo, you may delay reform for a while, but you will increase the likelihood of a government-run health system with no role for the private sector."

If your employees do all of these things, they just might be able to turn what may have been a grave hospital stay into a great hospital stay.

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