

How To Reduce Lengths of Stay In Hospitals

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Lengthy hospital stays translate into millions of dollars in expenses each year for hospitals and clinics of all sizes. Healthcare facilities must be very careful, however, to balance patient care needs with the incentive to clear a bed for the next patient.

Average Length of Stay in Hospitals

According to a 2016 study from the Healthcare Cost and Utilization Project, the average length of stay in a hospital is 4.6 days. In 2016, there were approximately 35.7 million hospital stays in the United States, which translates to just over 100 stays per 1,000 people populations¹.

Average Cost of Hospital Stay

The mean cost of these hospital stays in 2016 was \$11,700. The older age groups tended to have longer stays, however, cost remained relatively the same regardless of the age¹.

The Strain Extended Care Places On Healthcare Facilities

Longer hospital stays have wide-ranging effects on healthcare. Being in the hospital adds stress to the patient, making them more difficult to care for. Some suggest it may even delay healing. Extended stays also add work to an already overburdened staff, making them less efficient and requiring more resources such as food, laundry, housekeeping and medication.

Additionally, doctors, nurses and support staff are balancing overly full workloads with the need to individually ensure that all patients receive the highest standard of

care. Competing demands for the provider's time lead to distraction and mistakes, further complicating matters.

Reducing Stress in Hospital Patients

Being ill, stuck in a new environment, and surrounded by complex equipment can be extremely stressful for patients. Encourage a patient's loved ones to visit – the familiarity and knowledge that they're not alone can greatly reduce patient stress. Entertaining the patient with television, music, games, books and other simple tasks can also help distract them from the stressful environment.

Visitation should be monitored, however. Visitors shouldn't provide added stress. Ensure that the patient is able to get enough rest, and maintain a positive state of mind. Special care should also be taken with visitors under the age of 18, since they may find it difficult to deal with the situation and cause undo strain.

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Improving Patient Education

Patient stress is further complicated by a fear of the unknown. Patients often spend a great deal of time worrying about what will happen next, what tests and procedures they'll be enduring, and what it all means. Compounding the problem, many patients will not ask healthcare professionals to repeat themselves or explain if they don't understand something that was said.

Aftercare treatment is another concern. One study performed at the Cedars-Sinai Medical Center in California found that both coronary patients and physicians could affect lengths of stay from +/- 4.1 to +/- 3.0 days when patients were provided with regular written and verbal reminders of guidelines to lower the patient's risk of complications². This is significant for minimizing aftercare complications and enhancing patient outcomes.

Lean Manufacturing in Hospitals

With the introduction of lean manufacturing principles and on-demand production, Toyota was able to lower production costs, increase the number of cars they could produce daily, and easily overtake its competitors. These same principles can apply to the healthcare industry.

Instead of putting one person in charge of each job, lean manufacturing puts one person in charge of each 'piece', or in this case, patient. Quality is checked at each step and cleanup/standardization/organization, or 5S in lean manufacturing terms, is done in a similar manner.

As a result of one person handling each 'piece' end-to-end, there is more organization and less 'handling' of each piece, reducing mistakes and repetition.

This worked so well for the Children's Healthcare of Atlanta that they were able to reduce the length of emergency department visits from 190 minutes to 163 minutes in one year. In all, the hospital reduced emergency department visits by 38 percent³.

Even if hospitals don't invest in lean procedures, it is beneficial to examine processes for potential improvements in efficiency and safety. As a general rule, the less your patients are 'handled', the lower your facility's chance for mis-takes and redundancy.

Introduce New Technology and Treatments

Purchasing new technology can seem like a significant financial burden, particularly for smaller hospitals and those struggling with capital expenses. Yet the long-term benefits may outweigh the cost⁴. New technologies often require fewer resources and less time to complete, meaning more space in the operating room and shorter waiting lists for life-saving treatments. Illnesses then have less time to progress and can be treated more effectively. New technologies can be not only more effective, but also safer with a reduced chance for complications.

Research and constantly evolving information means there will always be new treatments and procedures emerging. As with all new technology, the initial

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investment can be substantial, but the improvement in patient care and treatment options offer substantial rewards.

Finally, regular training, education and recertification have been shown to increase employee confidence levels, making them more efficient, accurate and emotionally healthy, enabling them to provide better care.

Developing a Hospitalist Program

A customized weekend hospitalist program allows hospitals to relieve tired staff, enhance the level of care that patients receive, and lower overall staffing costs. Physicians, for instance, are able to maintain a quality work-life balance and partake of additional courses and studies, leaving them refreshed, relaxed and always at the forefront of their practice areas.

With a hospitalist program, hospitals are also more easily able to attract new physicians and reduce turnover. This makes it possible to access funds previously allocated to

recruiting, for use elsewhere in the facility. It is imperative, however, that hospitals choose a reputable healthcare staffing partner from which to source their staff. Chosen correctly, highly trained staff can ease stress, while bringing their own unique expertise and education.

Some of the above methods for stay reduction, including the hospitalist program, can be set up almost instantaneously. Others will take some time and effort to introduce. All of these techniques, however, have the potential to reduce lengths of stay and improve patient satisfaction.

If you would like to find out more about hospitalist programs or to secure competent and highly trained staff while lowering costs and improving patient care, contact Soliant today and speak to a representative.

1 Overview of U.S. Hospital Stays in 2016: Variation by Geographic Region., Healthcare Cost and Utilization Project

2 Practice guidelines and reminders to reduce duration of hospital stay for patients with chest pain. An interventional trial., US National Library of Medicine

3 Children's Healthcare Reduces Length of Stay, Increases Patient Satisfaction With Georgia Tech Assistance, Georgia Tech Enterprise Innovation Institute

4 Predicting the impact of new health technologies on average length of stay: Development of a prediction framework, International Journal of Technology Assessment in Health Care, University of Birmingham