

Enabling Effective Nurse Communications

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Introduction

Healthcare providers today face increasing pressure from many directions. They must improve patient care, despite persistent nursing staff shortages, and adopt new technologies in an ever-evolving environment. No single answer can address these issues, but there are some simple steps that can be taken to start the process. This paper demonstrates one of the avenues hospitals may take to solve some of these challenges through improving nurse communications.

At approximately 30 percent of the total hospital staff, nurses represent the largest constituent employee population in any hospital. They are the primary caregivers and are the common thread connecting patients to everything that touches them during their hospital stay. Coordinating patient care is a vital role of the nursing staff. In order for nurses to be most effective, it is critical that they have access to communications technologies that deliver the right message to the right person at the right time. Effective communication helps avoid costly errors, saves time and allows nurses to deliver the quality care that patients deserve.

Unfortunately, older processes and technologies often make it difficult for nurses to be as effective as possible. Inefficient communications systems centered on the nurses station are time-consuming. Often, they remove nurses from the patient care role, requiring them to be as much project manager as caregiver. Because of these limitations, nurses understand the importance of clear, concise communications and are often the first to recognize and embrace technologies that improve the flow of information throughout the hospital.

Effective communications enhance the nurse’s ability to be proactive in critical situations and improve their overall productivity in everyday activities.

Section 1: Current situation

A recent time and motion study by Hendrich and Chow determined how nurses spend their time during a typical shift. For the study, the research team tracked nurses in 36 medical-surgical units throughout 17 different health systems in 15 different states in the United States. The study’s objective was to identify the drivers of inefficiency in nursing work processes and unit design and then find ways to increase nursing effectiveness and efficiency. In essence, the study examined how well modern hospitals function and the relative delivery of safe patient care.

The study examined how nurses spent their time during a typical shift and found that 78 percent of the total nurse's time was spent on nursing practice. Of the nursing practice time, 35 percent was spent on documentation, 21 percent spent on care coordination and only 19 percent on patient care.

Breaking out care coordination — defined as communicating with other team members or other departments within the hospital — the study found that most of the related activities were conducted from the nurse's station, which kept nurses away from patients. The significant amount of time required for care coordination clearly demonstrates the importance of effective mobile communications in day-to-day nursing practice.

Nurses want to communicate and understand the need for good communications. Often, however, traditional institutional processes and older technologies make communications difficult; getting nurses the information they need when and where they need it is vital. Nurses need access to mobile methods of communication wherever they are within the hospital. And those communications must be able to distinguish who needs what information so that it gets to the right person in a timely manner. Nurses should not have to filter through masses of information in order to find what they need.

It is important to emphasize that even in the area of patient care, more time is spent at the nurse's station than with patients. Much of this is the result of having centralized telephones that the nurse must physically go to for communication needs and then wait for returned calls.

This arrangement also results in a significant amount of time spent walking back and forth to the nurse's station (an average of two to three and a half miles per shift) because of the centralized communications structure. It is important to note that walking usually takes nurses away from their patients. Does the nurse's station really need to play such a central role? This is a vital question considering the need for the nurse to be mobile.

Clearly, mobility is one of the obstacles limiting effective communication. Other obstacles involve getting information in the right way when verbal communication is not the most effective means. When the only thing the nurse has available to them is a desk phone, it limits their ability to receive other important information or to receive that information in the most effective way possible. A third obstacle to effective patient care is information overload. The information the nurse receives must be specifically for them and the work they are doing rather than general blasts of information that may or may not be relevant to the situation at hand.

Now more than ever, nurses need the tools and technology that enable clear, concise communications in an increasingly complex healthcare environment.



Section 2: Effective nursing communications

Effective nursing communications is all about getting the right information to the right person in the right format at the right time in the right location — all in a way that is easily understandable.

For example, when effective communication takes place, the nurse calls the physician and they connect through a conversation where both exchange information and direction regarding the care of the patient.

Unfortunately, communication is frequently ineffective. The nurse goes to the nurse's station to call the physician. The physician is busy with a patient and the nurse needs to leave a message asking the physician to return the call. Often the physician is not able to return the call until much later. By the time the message is returned, the nurse is busy with another patient and when he or she gets to the phone the physician has hung up. The game of phone tag has now begun and as a result, the nurse must start the procedure all over again. By the time they connect the information is often old and new information must be obtained that further delays clear direction on patient care.

Section 3: Future view

In the future, the nurse will have a mobile communication device that allows them to communicate no matter where they are located within a hospital. When the physician, or anyone else, needs to connect with the nurse, they contact them directly rather than through a centralized phone at the nurse's station. The connections occur in a timely and effective manner and current, accurate and complete information is exchanged leading to clear direction for the care of the patient. In addition to voice calls, this device also allows for other methods of communication. As a result, the nurse can be alerted to changes, needs or requests in multiple ways.

Section 4: Role of technology in effective communications

The Hendrick and Chow study also demonstrates that changes in technology and work processes should deliver substantial improvements in the use of nurses' time and the safe delivery of care.

The key to understanding the opportunities is to focus on the role of communications in improving nursing productivity. In this case, productivity gains are not about asking the nurse to do more with less, but rather what processes can be changed or done differently in order to improve patient care. To do this, hospitals need to investigate the communications processes and workflows they have in place today and identify the communications technologies that can make those processes more efficient, allowing nurses to do their jobs more effectively.

One of the keys to success is in understanding that there are distinct opportunities for improvement. Many of the routine work processes nurses currently perform can be automated, saving nurses' time while keeping them updated as to patient status. New technology allows nurses to have mobile communications they carry with them. This technology needs to be accessible and made widely available for staff nurses to ensure that they have the appropriate tools to enable more effective communications.

Despite the limitations of the communications technologies available to many of them, nurses work hard each day delivering the quality care patients need. Imagine how much better it could be if they could improve communications, work processes and technology as the study suggests?

Section 5: Avaya can help

Connectivity must happen in order to achieve effective communications. The various systems within a hospital need to talk with each other and share data seamlessly. This is what you will find in a smart hospital — seamless, ubiquitous and easy communications.

In a smart hospital, communications discontinuity is no longer an issue. You have the information you need when and where you need it. All the clinical systems are connected and talk to each other whether they are the EMR, lab, radiology or others. Duplication is eliminated. The communication needed for care coordination is automatic. The process, started by the nurse, is automatic and reports key checkpoints back to the nurse.

All devices are also connected, including monitors of all types, IV pumps and all other patient equipment. The devices are connected and automatically send monitored readings to the patient's medical record. All communication devices are connected; not just to each other, but to everything else so any information can be accessed from anywhere. The telephone has become a multi-use device. And when nursing leadership sees scheduling needs change — calling in staff or calling off staff — the process automatically works around parameters established by the hospital, giving the nursing manager time to work with his or her staff.

The exciting component within a smart hospital is that everything that can benefit from being connected is connected. Nurses are finally able to spend the time with patients that they should be able to in order to do their jobs as effectively as possible.

The focus in a smart hospital is on effective communication. Getting the information nurses need in the way they need it, when they need it and where they need it. The right information is sent to the right person in the right format at the right time in the right location. This is the future of healthcare. And that future is here today.

Section 6: What makes a hospital a smart hospital?

A smart hospital is one where the behind-the-scenes technologies help improve nursing productivity without fundamentally changing the way the hospital works. This means that nurses are better able to do their jobs without having to become technology experts, computer scientists or programmers. The key technologies include:

- Core communications
- Applications and solutions that improve workflow
- Clinical Mobility technologies and solutions that allow people to be in contact, whenever and wherever they need to be.

Core communications include the basic technology backbone that keeps a modern hospital running. This includes the networking equipment that connects all of the computers in the hospital that also provides Internet access and telephone service. In addition to the network, there are the basic applications that hospitals need to operate effectively, including voicemail and electronic badge readers. And finally, core communications include wireless access to the network and Internet that all modern hospitals have come to rely on for both staff and patient connections.

Workflow solutions take advantage of the connectivity provided by core communications technologies to help various processes in a hospital work better and work together seamlessly. They eliminate both paperwork and manual tasks and automate various processes that take up a significant amount of a nurse's time. This includes automating such things as much of the call and approval process that is required for a patient to be discharged, sending automatic appointment reminders to patients for an upcoming visit via multiple channels such as phone calls and email, and simplifying internal processes during patient admissions that reduce the number of calls required to get an emergency room patient into a room when they need to be admitted.

Clinical mobility technologies are usually the most visible evidence of effective nursing communications in a smart hospital. Clinical mobility technologies generally include all of the devices and equipment that connect remote and mobile people and equipment to each other. This includes everything from mobile handsets that are carried when nurses are on a shift to the RFID tags used to track equipment and people throughout the hospital. Done right, clinical mobility allows nurses to spend more time taking care of patients and less waiting for calls or other information to arrive at the nurse's station.

In the smart hospital, people, systems and equipment are all in sync, working together seamlessly to improve patient care and reduce costs. Avaya Healthcare Solutions use your existing voice and data networks to make it possible.



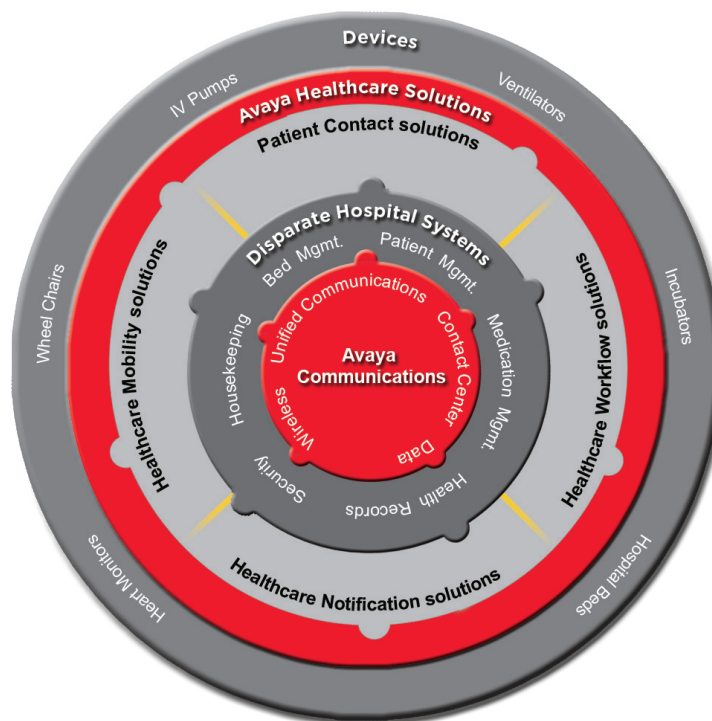
Section 7: Avaya has a proven track record

Avaya takes a comprehensive approach to effectively integrating communication technologies into a modern hospital environment in order to help nurses be more productive. It is not just about adding a few features to voice systems, or making data products that are regulatory-compliant. It is about finding ways to leverage core technologies to make hospitals better.

By developing solutions that use technology to enhance nursing productivity, Avaya is helping hospitals refine what they do best without changing much of what they already do. Over 7,500 healthcare providers around the world rely on Avaya products and solutions to improve their ability to deliver quality care.

Section 8: Avaya solutions for a smart hospital

Avaya Healthcare Solutions empower hospitals to take full advantage of their integrated voice and data networks to help make nurses and clinicians more productive and workflows more efficient. Avaya Healthcare Solutions consist of four categories: Healthcare Mobility, Healthcare Workflow, Healthcare Notification and Patient Contact.



Avaya Healthcare Solutions

Healthcare Mobility solutions are fundamental technology solutions that give hospital staff greater mobility without compromising accessibility. They leverage presence, messaging, voice recognition and location capabilities to enhance staff productivity in a highly mobile environment. They improve productivity with tasks ranging from locating and communicating with other staff to keeping track of patients and portable medical equipment, as well as using mobile handsets to receive clinical alarms and alerts and other notifications.

Avaya Healthcare Mobility solutions include:

- **Asset Tracking and Management** – Identifies and reports the location and status of critical resources in a hospital via RFID tags and wireless LAN technologies, reducing equipment searches and waiting times while lowering equipment inventory requirements
- **Mobile Device Checkout** – Allows nurses and clinicians to “checkout” a mobile handset while maintaining a personalized contact number at all times
- **Nurse communications** – A set of advanced communications tools that are uniquely tuned to support the collaborative work demands of the nursing staff, enabling increased nursing productivity and enhanced patient care

Healthcare Workflow solutions use integrated communications technologies and leverage the Healthcare Mobility solutions to accelerate workflows involving human-to-application or human-to-human interaction. When a clinical process uses these accelerated workflows, the end result is improved staff productivity and operational efficiency. This translates into improved patient throughput, patient care and reduced operating costs. Another important result is increased clinician satisfaction as clinicians spend more time with patients and less on administrative and manual tasks.

- **Patient Discharge** – Streamlines the patient discharge process via automation of internal and external approvals and notifications, increasing patient throughput and boosting nursing productivity
- **Patient Admit** – Automates the communications processes surrounding the admittance of a new patient, reducing costs and increasing staff efficiency

Healthcare Notification solutions allow information and instructions to be transmitted in real-time across the organization or to a specific doctor, nurse or other professional. These interactive events notifications improve hospital operations, staff productivity and patient quality of care.

- **Nurse-Call Response** – allows the nursing staff to receive and respond to urgent patient needs and help alleviate long wait-times for patients

Patient Contact solutions provide an interactive patient, clinician and hospital experience. These solutions automate routine processes in an efficient manner to allow improved clinical productivity and expanded patient interaction outside of the hospital. This automation also improves patient satisfaction with relevant information delivery and streamlined access to hospital personnel when required.

- **Patient Follow-up** – Automates the follow-up calls that hospitals conduct once a patient leaves the facility, enabling hospitals to lower patient readmits through increased post-discharge patient monitoring
- **Patient Appointment Reminder** – Automates the appointment reminder processes, reducing the number of surgical no-shows, allowing hospitals to recover costs and eliminate non-critical administrative tasks

Avaya also provides the core communications capabilities for Avaya Healthcare Communications. They include the secure, robust networking and communications infrastructures that offer ubiquitous IP connectivity throughout a facility while saving energy and delivering outstanding performance.

- **Unified Communications** – Provides secure and reliable IP voice infrastructure collaboration tools vital in a modern hospital setting
- **Call Center** – Delivers functionality such as Integrated Voice Response (IVR), call center and automated attendant that hospitals rely on every day in order to function
- **Data** – Delivers a safe, secure and resilient networking infrastructure that meets the stringent requirements of a healthcare environment
- **Wireless** – Extends secure access to critical information and communications technologies to anywhere a clinician, nurse or doctor is located

So what does all of this mean? It means technologies are available today to give nurses and other hospital staff the ability to communicate with each other — and with vital information — whenever and wherever it is needed. The days of the nurse being tethered to the nurse's station waiting for doctors to return phone calls is over. Communications technologies in the smart hospital allow nurses to spend more time with patients taking care of their needs directly and less time trying to coordinate care.

Avaya offers the communications tools and technologies that a modern hospital needs to make its other systems more efficient, its staff more effective and its business more successful.

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Philip Authier, RN, BSN, MPH, is a former senior nursing executive with a wealth of experience and industry knowledge and brings with him insights gained over a long career in nursing management, hospital administration and healthcare leadership consulting. He has been a member of the American Organization of Nursing Executives (AONE) since 1985 and served as president in 2002. He co-chaired the Standards Inventory Committee (SIC) within the National Alliance of Health Information Technology group (NAHIT). He has also been an active leader in a number of nursing networks, including: CHI Nurse Leader Group, Center for Nursing Leadership, the Global Nursing Exchange, State Nursing Organizations in South Dakota and Michigan, and American Organization of Nurse Executives.

In addition to his contributions to these professional organizations, Philip Authier also has the experience of hands-on management in hospital administration. He held the position of Vice President of Patient Care at Saint Mary's Healthcare Center, Pierre, SD; Director of Nursing and Assistant Administrator, Crook County Memorial Hospital, Sundance, WY; and Director of Nursing, Assistant Administrator, and Hospital Administrator, Bennett County Community Hospital, Martin, SD. He earned an advanced degree, Master of Public Health – Health Service Administration, from the University of Minnesota, and a Bachelor of Science in Nursing at South Dakota State University.

About Avaya

Avaya is a global leader in enterprise communications systems. The company provides unified communications, contact centers, and related services directly and through its channel partners to leading businesses and organizations around the world. Enterprises of all sizes depend on Avaya for state-of-the-art communications that improve efficiency, collaboration, customer service and competitiveness. For more information please visit www.avaya.com.



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