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Nurse Practitioners: Meeting the Need for Skilled Health Professionals

By Staff Reports

BY TONI ARDABELL and GEORGE A. PARKER It is difficult to say how the reformation of our current health care system will shake out and what it will mean in terms of patient demand on physician offices and hospital environments. One thing is for certain: All indicators point to a greater patient population with more Americans seeking care than ever before.

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It is difficult to say how the reformation of our current health care system will shake out and what it will mean in terms of patient demand on physician offices and hospital environments. One thing is for certain: All indicators point to a greater patient population with more Americans seeking care than ever before.

The idea of more patients has raised the issue of who will provide that care. The answer could be in the hands of some 135,000 skilled and experienced nurse practitioners across the United States who are ready and waiting to do what they've been trained to do -- care for patients.

But as with any reform, there will undoubtedly be lengthy discussions about whether increasing the patient-care roles of nurse practitioners is the right approach.

In this instance, debating the issue itself would be the wrong approach. Utilization of nurse practitioners is the answer. A change in procedure such as this comes down to a very basic principle: cooperation and care-sharing in a health care setting.

A turf war between physicians and nurse practitioners will not bring about the global approach to care that so many Americans are counting on. It only will succeed in keeping our nation -- whose goal is to increase access to quality care for its citizens -- from resolving a national crisis.

Patients have long been confident in the care provided by nurse practitioners. After all, they are

registered nurses with master's degrees or PhDs and advanced training in the diagnosis and management of both routine and complex medical conditions. In Virginia, nurse practitioners are regulated by both the state Board of Nursing and the Board of Medicine, and they work in collaboration with -- and under the supervision of -- medical doctors.

In the past 10 years, nurse practitioners increasingly have assumed a more direct role in delivering and prescribing care in medical offices, clinics, hospitals, schools, and prisons. The vast majority are engaged in primary medical care.

As policymakers look at "bending the cost curve" in health care -- Washington's term for saving money -- and providing access to primary care in underserved areas, more and more attention is given to the future role of nurse practitioners in the evolving U.S. health system. It is a move in the right direction.

The issue is not one of cutting quality or limiting the public's access to physicians in the health system of tomorrow. It is about making the best use of the skills of nurse practitioners and deploying them at the right points in the health care system to deliver caring and less costly care.

Defining the respective roles of physicians and nurse practitioners and allowing for appropriate consultations and referrals between the two continues to be a matter for evaluation and study.

Currently, nurse practitioners and physicians maintain close working relationships. Speaking as a physician and a hospital administrator, we see the benefits of nurse practitioners as both providers and leaders in health care delivery, particularly in our new world of health care reform.

Nurse practitioners are a proven resource for giving high-quality, cost-effective care to patients in many clinical settings. As medical facilities like Bon Secours Health System are working to automate records and reform the clinical process, nurse practitioners are effective leaders and integral to the creation of "medical homes" for patients -- places where records, lab results, and health care information are stored and accessible to all authorized members of a patient's professional health care team, and to patients and their families as appropriate.

Nurse practitioners also fill a vital role in transitional care, a health reform model whereby patients in recovery or rehab spend only the required time in a hospital -- and more time at home or in less-supervised settings. Nurse practitioners can also provide leadership in improving advanced primary care practices, promoting greater independence at home, staffing community-based primary care clinics, as well as facilitating the management of chronic illness.

Our advice to state and federal policymakers and professional organizations: Bring nurse practitioners to the table as partners. What better reform than a united vision with one goal in mind -- exceptional care and successful outcomes for patients?

The nursing profession is ready and willing to help address the unmet health care needs in this country. Take advantage of a good thing and bring nurses further into the fold.

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