

2008 Predictions - Technology Education Lead the Way

Any predictions about the state of healthcare in 2008 have to include the critical shortage of clinicians, including nurses and therapists. But that very shortage has forced home health providers like ours to embrace new technology and look for other innovative solutions that we might otherwise have ignored or put on hold.

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services predicts that by 2020 the country will be short approximately 1 million nurses, the result of both falling supply and increasing demand. Metro Atlanta has approximately 20,000 working nurses and nursing assistants and 2,000 open positions.

Even though the health services sector is a strong economic engine in Atlanta, the shortage of clinicians is magnified here because our population is aging more quickly than in many other major U.S. cities. For example, this means that even if an adequate supply of nurses and nursing assistants existed today, about 800 more would be needed every year just to keep pace with the healthcare needs of the region's booming and aging population.

In 2008, home health will continue to be a cost-effective way of providing patient care. We predict that hospitals will continue to reduce the length of inpatient stays as a necessary cost-cutting measure, and transition patients to home health providers more quickly than in the past. The result will be an increased need for highly skilled and knowledgeable clinicians who can provide complex treatment modalities to patients in their homes.

Home health providers will also need to leverage technology in order to deliver higher levels of care to larger numbers of patients. Visiting Nurse /Hospice Atlanta switched to an electronic medical record (EMR) and point of care system 14 years ago, and was the first home health provider in Atlanta to do so. We are on our third generation of EMR technology, and others in home health are following suit, improving patient safety and reducing the amount of time clinicians spend on documentation. Now that many metro Atlanta hospitals have also switched to EMR technology, we envision an ever more secure and efficient exchange of patient information between hospitals and home health providers.

Home telemonitoring technology is an effective way of marshalling the clinical resources necessary to deliver the highest quality care. In 2008, we predict a marked expansion of home telemonitoring and the development of a new generation of clinicians who have, or are eager to learn, the skills that will help them accurately assess the needs of telemonitored patients.

With too few certified wound nurses, more home health providers will utilize wound care imaging. This technology cuts down on the number of consulting visits needed per patient, and is an important tool to care for an aging population likely to suffer from chronic wounds caused by adult-onset diabetes and other similar conditions.

An inevitable downside of all of this new technology is the cost involved, which runs into the millions of dollars. Not only do organizations have to purchase the necessary hardware and software, but they need to train clinicians to use it. In the long run, however, investing in these new technologies today sets the stage for improved healthcare tomorrow. Imagine the quality of clinical outcomes if we had this technology and all the clinicians we need.

The average age of hospital nurses is 45-50 and increases every year. Recent media stories have focused on the baby boomers' desire to remain in the workforce longer than previous generations. If baby boomer clinicians feel the same way their corporate peers apparently do, the flexible schedules, more autonomous environment and available technology tools of home healthcare providers are very real enticements that we envision will encourage more mid-career nurses to transition into home health in 2008.

Clinicians who left the workforce to raise families, or for other reasons, can also be encouraged to return if given the right incentives. Home health providers rely on nurses who are experienced - preferably with acute care experience. They also need to be competent, confident and able to work autonomously.

In 2008 we look forward to seeing more refresher courses for returning nurses, such as the one offered at Kennesaw State University's WellStar College of Health and Human Services. Their Nurse Refresher/Re-Entry course uses classroom and web learning to help nurses get up to speed with today's clinical knowledge and technology. Our hope is that more educational institutions will take this approach in 2008 and beyond.

Technology and education, however, are only the beginning. We look forward to creating closer relationships between Atlanta's hospitals, home health providers, nursing schools and public health departments to develop workable solutions that will make Atlanta a leader in healthcare for generations to come.



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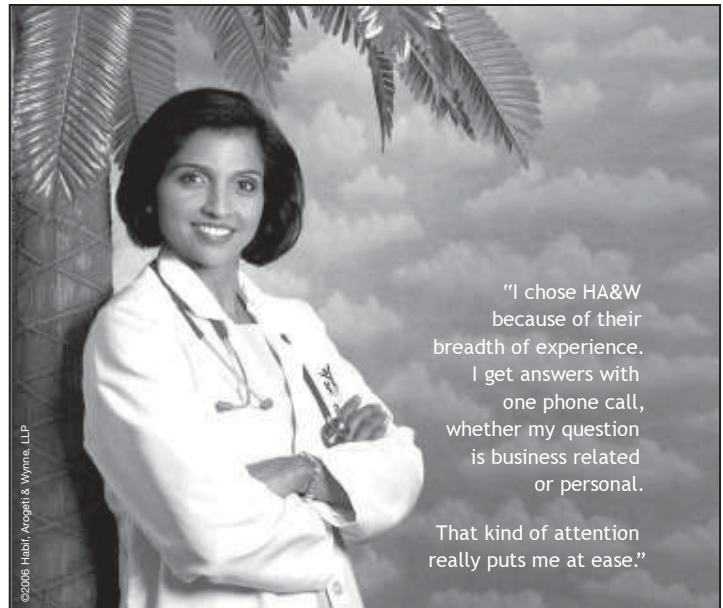
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