

Excellence in nursing

Nursing is at the core of patient-centered care at Avera McKennan

BY DONNA FARRIS, AVERA MCKENNAN WRITER/EDITOR

ONE PATIENT. That's who everything centers around at Avera McKennan, and nursing is at the very core of patient-centered care.

"Physicians and other support services are very critical in patient care. Yet the patient's nurse is the constant in their care, 24/7," said Judy Blauwet, senior vice president of Hospital Operations and chief nursing officer at Avera McKennan.

"Our business is all about caring for patients and their families. I paraphrase mission down to one word, which is the **patient**," Blauwet said.

With 1,000+ nurses out of 5,000 employees, nurses comprise the largest percentage of any group in the Avera McKennan region, which includes Avera McKennan Hospital & University Health Center, regional hospitals, clinics, and long-term care facilities.

Supply and demand

Yet forecasts point to a shortage of nurses nationwide – and in South Dakota. Nationwide, a shortage of at least 340,000 RNs is predicted by 2020. In South Dakota, total annual demand for nurses is estimated to be 550 per year through at least 2014. Demand will soon converge with the number of available

No nurse is 'just a nurse'

"Just a nurse" is no way to adequately describe professionals who provide skilled and compassionate care 24/7.

"In terms of caring for patients, nursing is where it's at. It's very important work," said Lori Popkes, RN, assistant vice president for Women and Children's Services.

Spending several years as a bedside nurse herself, Popkes has experience in critical care, emergency care, labor and delivery, pediatric heart surgery, cardiac care, rural health care and radiology.

Her management experience includes serving as director of clinical services of Select Specialty Hospital, housed within Avera McKennan, and interim director of nursing at Landmann-Jungman Memorial Hospital Avera in Scotland, S.D., before becoming involved with Women's and Children's leadership at Avera McKennan in 2004.

Popkes was drawn to nursing as a college student, working part time as a patient care tech. "I knew I wanted to work in a hospital. I loved interacting with patients and families."

An extra effort to connect with patients and families is what creates a "WOW" patient experience, Popkes said. When nurses make that effort, they get back so much more than they give.

"Nursing is such a privilege. You interact with patients and families at the most vulnerable points of their lives."

The profession of nursing is amazing and exciting, as a new life is welcomed into the world, or a trauma victim wakes up from a coma. It can also be emotional, as nurses help patients transition from this life with dignity and respect. "Most professions never have that opportunity," Popkes said.

While Popkes loves patient care and misses direct patient interaction, she also loves nursing leadership. Because she was mentored herself, Popkes understands the importance of mentorship. "Leadership is a unique opportunity to seek people out, and help them develop by focusing on their strengths, not their weaknesses."

She still carries with her an important truth, passed on by her own mentor. "Nursing is about treating every patient and family as if they were our own grandmother, mother, father, sister or child."

Patients don't live in a "medical" world. Terms like EKG and CBC are not part of their vocabulary. "They are often scared, confused and in pain. We have such an opportunity to touch their lives," Popkes said.

In concert with the Avera gospel mission, it's Popkes' aspiration to care for patients and families as Christ would, and encourage others to do the same. "What better example is there?"



'Gold medal' for nursing excellence

Magnet is “a gold medal for nursing” – a designation Avera McKennan has held since 2001, when it was the 36th hospital nationwide to be honored through the Magnet Recognition Program® by the American Nurses Credentialing Center.

There are now 289 facilities nationwide that have achieved Magnet status, which recognizes quality patient care, nursing excellence and innovations in professional nursing practice.

“Magnet facilities are the best of the best,” said Carla Borchardt, director of professional practice at Avera McKennan.

During the 1980s, in spite of a national nursing shortage, some facilities were able to attract and retain registered nurses. A national study set out to learn why these hospitals could draw nurses like a magnet, and came up with 14 different attributes, or “Forces of Magnetism”

These forces include...

- Quality of Nursing Leadership
- Organizational Structure
- Management Style
- Personnel Policies and Programs
- Professional Models of Care
- Quality of Care
- Quality Improvement
- Consultation and Resources
- Autonomy
- Community and the Health Care Organization
- Nurses as Teachers
- Image of Nursing
- Interdisciplinary Relationships
- Professional Development



graduates, although nursing schools have already increased admissions in response.

Average age of nurses in South Dakota is 46. Looking forward one to two decades, many will cut down on their hours or retire. “We can hire more nurses, but you’re watching 30 to 40 years of clinical experience go out the door, to be replaced by someone who has none,” said Darcy Sherman Justice, director of Nursing Professional Development and Integration at Avera McKennan.

Avera McKennan leaders are confidently facing this challenge with proactive strategies. “I’m not saying it won’t be a challenge, but we are working hard here at Avera McKennan, and at a state and regional level to ensure we do not face an acute shortage,” Blauwet said. That includes participating in state workforce development efforts, partnering with educational institutions, and enhancing recruitment and retention efforts.

A tradition of excellence

Excellence in nursing is an important tradition at Avera McKennan. In 2001, Avera McKennan was the 36th hospital nationwide to be honored through the Magnet Recognition Program® by the American Nurses Credentialing Center. There are now 289 facilities nationwide that have achieved Magnet status for nursing excellence.

“Magnet helps us as an organization stay focused on the profession of nursing and continue to build, so the profession stays strong,” Blauwet said. “It absolutely translates to great patient care.”

National certification is another benchmark of quality at Avera McKennan. Of the hospital’s 700+RNs, over 300, or 44 percent, are nationally certified in their specialty.

Why should Magnet recognition matter to patients?

“If hospitals value nurses’ input in decision-making, give them autonomy, and help them continue their development – if we encourage the best of the best – outcomes in patient care and quality will follow,” Borchardt said.

Magnet recognition results from a voluntary application process. “We submit 15 inches of paper that tells our story, how Avera McKennan meets and exceeds these national standards for nursing excellence,” Borchardt said. The result for each application is a shelf-full of binders.

That information is reviewed by expert nurse appraisers, who also do a site visit. “They want to see if what we live in our daily practice matches our story. They spend time with our RNs, to see if this is truly what we live and breathe every day,” Borchardt said.

To ensure that Magnet facilities continue as the “best of the best,” a new application is due every four years. After gaining Magnet status for the first time in 2001, Avera McKennan was re-designated in 2005, and will be up for re-designation again in 2009.

Outcomes are yet another quality indicator. For example,

- The Neonatal Intensive Care Unit has completed six months with zero central line infections. Such infections typically lengthen patient stay by 14 days and increase costs by \$30,000.
- Wound-Ostomy-Continence nurses have held hospital-acquired pressure ulcer prevalence to only 1 percent, compared to a national average of 11-15 percent.
- ICU staff have reduced ventilator-acquired pneumonias from 15 percent to 5 percent.
- The Pediatric Intensive Care Unit has had zero central line infections and zero ventilator-acquired pneumonias since 2005.

“Nursing is both an art and a science,” Blauwet said. “Our service in caring for patients is the art; our competence in providing quality care is the science.”

The brightest and best

Maintaining a high level of excellence in care means not just filling positions with



anyone who is available. “We want the brightest and the best,” Blauwet said.

Human Resources staff and nursing leaders start early – at the high school

level, encouraging students to consider health care careers, and at the college level, making early contacts with freshmen nursing students.

Health care students are offered clinical experiences and preceptorships during their education. Those wishing to work part time while going to school are considered for phlebotomist or patient care technician jobs. “We want them to see that we are an exceptional organization to work

Great ideas enhance patient care

Francie Miller, RN, is an “idea person”

“How can we do things better for the patient?”

Miller, assistant vice president for Emergency and Adult Specialty Services, is responsible for the Emergency Department; flight program; intensive care; specialty services on 1 West, 1 East and 3 East nursing units; and palliative care.



She began her nursing career in critical care, and joined Avera McKennan to work in Emergency Services. She progressed to Emergency Department manager, and has held various directorships in the hospital, including Director of Critical Care for a number of years.

In 1986, she took the lead role in starting the Careflight program. “We recognized that all patients did not have the same access to critical care. Many states at that time had air transport programs; South Dakota did not,” Miller said.

She took an initiative in developing the Avera eICU® CARE program in 2004 which uses telemedicine technology to extend ICU specialty care to remote locations. Avera has since become a pioneer in providing eICU services in a rural setting.

In the new Emergency Department, completed in December 2007, she was the driving force behind many design elements and unique features for patient and family friendliness, privacy and efficiency. Miller also took the lead in ensuring that all ED physicians at Avera McKennan are trained and board-certified in Emergency Medicine. This fact, along with Avera McKennan’s state-of-the-art facility and LEAN efficiency, sets Avera McKennan’s ED apart in the region and the Midwest.

“I enjoy interacting with patients and families,” Miller said. But advocating for the needs of patients in her decision-making has become an even greater role, in terms of access to care, access to the best technology, and quality of care.

“If we always put the patient at the center, we can’t make a bad decision,” Miller said.

for,” Blauwet said.

Staying ahead of a coming nurse shortage means proactively thinking outside the box. Human Resources and nursing leaders have implemented an innovative plan which involves inviting potential nurses to special recruiting events. Rolling out the red carpet, they tell

Avera McKennan’s story as only nurses can and conduct group interviews.

The result is 107 new RNs joining Avera McKennan over the summer of 2008. The goal is to eliminate the number of open positions and dependence on traveling nurses.

“NURSING IS BOTH AN ART AND A SCIENCE.”

– JUDY BLAUWET, SENIOR VICE PRESIDENT FOR HOSPITAL OPERATIONS AND CHIEF NURSING OFFICER

After new RNs are hired, they enter an “on-boarding” process to orient them to the hospital, to the unit, and to nursing as a profession.

“There’s so much to know in the profession of nursing that students can’t get it all in school. They come with the book learning; now they need the experience,” said Sherman Justice, who developed and now leads a formal mentoring program at Avera McKennan.

Key aspects of this program are clinical nurse educators and mentors in the nursing units. Leaving nurses to find their own way would lead to poor care outcomes, as well as expensive turnover.

Once good nurses are recruited, it’s critical to retain them. Cost to lose a floor nurse is \$40,000-\$50,000, and that cost escalates to \$60,000-\$70,000 for a surgical or ICU nurse.

Process Excellence is a hospital-wide initiative at Avera McKennan that emphasizes efficiency, translating into less running for nurses so they can spend the bulk of their time caring for patients – the reason they entered the health care profession in the first place.

Technological advances, such as bedside computers and electronic medical records, reduce paperwork load. Concepts like Avera eICU® CARE allow nurses to share their valuable expertise without the physical demands of working on a floor.

Nursing as a career

“We want nurses to have a career at Avera McKennan, not just a job,” Blauwet said. Some want to continue on the path of patient care, because that’s what they love the most. “We honor and build on that desire,” Blauwet said.

Options for nurses are ever-increasing. Nurses can go on to become a clinical expert in given area. They may seek advanced degrees and become a clinical nurse leader, nurse practitioner or nurse anesthetist.

Those who love to teach may become a mentor, nurse educator or faculty member in a nursing education program.

Another realm of opportunity is nurse governance, through the Avera McKennan Nurse Governance Council or state and national organizations. These organizations work toward awareness of issues in nursing, such as professional development, safety or physical demands of the profession, said Sherman Justice, who has served as president of the South Dakota Nurses Association and is known as an advocate for nurses.

“As nurses, we have a done a good job in raising the bar for expectations, accountability, and pride in the nursing profession. We’re a valued member of

the health care team,” Blauwet said.

Nurses work in areas such as information technology, safety, radiology, laboratory and public health. “Nursing is also a good background for health care law, finance, administration and clinic management,” Blauwet said.

A number of managers, directors and administrators at Avera McKennan began their careers as clinical nurses, said Blauwet, who joined Avera McKennan in 1980 as an ICU staff nurse. She held nursing leadership and directorship roles, before becoming a senior vice president for Business Development in 1999, and senior vice president of Hospital Operations in 2006.

“This entire scope is an option for anyone in nursing,” Blauwet said.

