

## **Health Matters – May 2009**

### *What is a Hospitalist?*

In the last five years, Lakeview Hospital developed a hospital medicine program using physicians called “hospitalists”. Hospitalists are experts in caring for hospitalized patients. As the newest member of our hospital medicine group, I’d like to explain how these changes benefit patients and their primary care doctors.

Our medical system has been slowly changing, and now hospitalists provide a growing proportion of hospital care in the United States. At Lakeview Hospital, the majority of patients will see a hospitalist during their medical stay. Our hospitalists work closely with primary care physicians and surgeons to provide high-quality, compassionate medical care to patients in the St. Croix valley.

Since the mid 1990’s, the number of hospitalists in the United States has grown tremendously. In fact, the term “hospitalist” was coined only in 1996. In 1997, there were estimated to be around 1,000 hospitalists in the entire country. By 2007, there were around 20,000. In some areas of the country, hospitalists provide up to 70 percent of hospital care. Hospitalists typically train in primary care specialties such as family medicine, internal medicine or pediatrics and focus on caring for hospitalized patients.

Before hospitalists, Americans were likely to be cared for by their primary care physicians during hospitalizations. Your doctor would typically stop by the hospital in the morning or at lunchtime to round and would spend the rest of the day in clinic. Now, primary care has begun to split into two areas - outpatient primary care and hospital care. There are several factors contributing to this change.

First, outpatient primary care has become very complex. Medical advances have given primary care physicians more tools to successfully care for people with multiple, complicated illnesses. Advances in preventive care save lives. With these gains, primary care physicians need more time to coordinate their patients’ care. The complexity of primary care requires focus. By concentrating on clinic, primary care doctors are able to devote more time to creating a medical home for their patients.

At the same time, hospital care has changed. Hospitalized patients, on average, are more seriously ill. This is partly because we treat many more problems outside of the hospital. For example, when I started my medical training, anyone with deep venous thrombosis (blood clot in a big vein of an arm or leg) was hospitalized, often for many days, while the clot dissolved. Now the majority of patients are treated at home and clinic for this illness, with better outcomes.

Therefore, only the sickest patients are admitted to the hospital. Caring for these very ill patients is complex. Patients frequently require physicians to be at the bedside throughout the day; it’s no longer enough to only be in the hospital for morning rounds. Since

hospitalists specialize in caring for hospitalized patients, they feel very comfortable treating these serious illnesses.

Because hospitalists do not have clinics, they have time to focus on the needs of very ill hospital patients. And doctors who focus only on clinic have more time to provide excellent primary care. Patients win.

Lakeview Hospital now has five hospitalists. We care for the majority of medical patients at Lakeview, assisted on weekends and some nights by Stillwater Medical Group primary care physicians. We also participate in the care of surgical patients with complicated medical problems. A small number of primary care physicians from Stillwater Medical Group still care directly for their hospitalized patients. Your care is carefully coordinated between your hospitalist and your primary care doctor. Your hospitalist will also coordinate any specialty care and consultations during your hospitalization.

Admittedly, this is a big change. If hospitalized, you may wonder, “Will my doctor see me in the hospital?” The answer is increasingly that one of your doctor’s hospitalist partners will coordinate your care. Rest assured that your hospitalist will keep your doctor informed and that your doctor will look forward to seeing you in clinic after your hospital stay.



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