Cultivating Specialty Expertise through Medical-Surgical Nurse Certification

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Introduction

The Future of Nursing-2010 Institute of Medicine includes recommendations for healthcare organizations to provide the support and necessary resources for nurses to engage in continued learning to ensure they have the knowledge and skills necessary to care for diverse patient populations. Specially certification is one method to achieve this recommendation. Studies reveal that certified nurses demonstrate expert knowledge and proficient skill competencies, which is associated with higher rates of patient satisfaction and lower rates of healthcare-associated errors. Campaigns launched to expand the number of certified nurses within an organization are rewarded with a positive impact on patient care outcomes.

Purpose

1. Describe the infrastructure of a program designed to prepare nurses to take the medical-surgical certification exam.  
2. Discuss strategies that increase the number of nurses who take a certification exam and successfully pass.

Strategy and Implementation

Realizing the need to increase the number of certified medical-surgical nurses within our organization, a review course and an exam application process was developed to appeal to the busy bedside nurse. Incentives were provided to encourage nurses to not only participate in the review course, but also to apply and take the exam, which historically were barriers to successful certification. Because of the financial incentives offered, participants were expected to sign a contract of commitment, attend all classes, submit all required paperwork, and take the examination within the specified time period to be eligible.

Significance

In the United States, there are 2.6 million employed nurses. Over half of those, 58%, work on a medical-surgical unit. In accordance with these statistics, medical-surgical nurses comprise more than half of the nurses practicing within our multi-hospital network. Therefore, promoting medical-surgical certification could significantly enhance the care quality provided to our patients while also assisting to meet organizational goals like Magnet Re-Designation and national benchmarking for quality and service.

Results

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>Registered to Test</th>
<th>Passed Exam</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2013</td>
<td>20 Review Course</td>
<td>20 Registered to Test</td>
<td>16 Passed Exam</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2014</td>
<td>40 Review Course</td>
<td>40 Registered to Test</td>
<td>8 Passed Exam</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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Nursing Implications

Many healthcare organizations see the value in cultivating expert nurses through certification. Exam preparation support, financial resources, and celebrating achievement have proven to be the keys to our success.

Over recent years, Cone Health has seen a consistent gradual increase in certified medical-surgical nurses. This data correlates with our successful quality patient outcomes, nationally recognized bench marking and a third consecutive Magnet Re-designation.

Anecdotally, due to the medical complexity of hospitalized patients and the expert knowledge required to competently provide their care, nurses are often choosing to become certified in specialties associated with specific patient populations rather than the generalizable medical-surgical certification. Nurses who meet the required specifications for a medical-surgical certification are choosing specialty certifications in neuroscience, orthopedics, oncology, rehabilitation, cardiovascular, and progressive care. Because of this, we have begun to place our focus on nurses practicing on units that primarily care for general medical and surgical patients and to encourage them to see their practice as a specialty, too.

References


Incentives to Encourage RNs to Take Med-Surg Certification Exam:

- Exam-specific review course with clinical expert instructors
- Exam prep questions and test-taking tips component
- Simulation experiences in Sim Lab for applying learned content
- Financial compensation for time attending review classes
- Application assurance with required ANCC paperwork by Cone Health
- Payment of testing fees by Cone Health
- Application submitted for RN by Cone Health

Nurses who participated in the optional simulation component passed the exam.