The Rising Tide Measure: Communication With Nurses

At no other point in history have patient perceptions of care had such a direct, quantifiable impact on health care organizations’ financial performance and impact on clinical outcomes. Specifically, 30% of hospitals’ VBP incentive payments will be determined by how patients evaluate their stay on eight HCAHPS dimensions that make up the Patient Experience of Care domain within the VBP framework.

Summary
The critical role that nurses play in the health care system has long been understood. A Press Ganey study further demonstrates this importance and the essential role nurses serve in transforming the health care system. Starting October 2012, hospitals’ Medicare payments began to be partially tied to their scores on the Hospital Consumer Assessment of Healthcare Providers and Systems (HCAHPS) survey. A Press Ganey study shows that performance on the Communication with Nurses dimension strongly influences four other Patient Experience of Care dimensions within the value-based purchasing (VBP) framework. Further, there is a growing body of evidence that HCAHPS performance in general — and performance on the Communications with Nurses dimension in particular — is strongly associated with hospital performance on other Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS) payment programs. Thinking of Communication with Nurses as a “rising tide measure,” and focusing improvement efforts on the factors that drive scores, may be an effective way to maximize VBP incentive payments and improve hospital performance on other pay-for-performance initiatives. Ultimately, these efforts promise to have a substantial impact on delivering true patient-centered care.

Overview
At no other point in history have patient perceptions of care had such a direct, quantifiable impact on health care organizations’ financial performance and clinical outcomes. Specifically, 30% of hospitals’ VBP incentive payments will be determined by how patients evaluate their stay on eight HCAHPS dimensions that make up the Patient Experience of Care domain within the VBP framework:

- Communication with Doctors
- Communication with Nurses
- Responsiveness of Hospital Staff
- Pain Management
- Communication about Medication
- Cleanliness/Quietness of Hospital Environment
- Discharge Information
- Overall Rating

Hospitals have the opportunity to impact up to half of that 30% by focusing their efforts on one particular metric. A Press Ganey study identified Communication with Nurses as a “rising tide measure” among the eight HCAHPS dimensions of care. A rising tide measure is one whose change and trajectory in performance is correlated with multiple measures. This effect is important to understand when devising performance improvement strategies because, as the score of a rising tide measure increases, the scores of the associated measures are likely to rise as well.
Considering that most hospitals have a wide range of improvement opportunities and limited resources to expend on them, the findings from the study offer important insights on how hospitals can strategically implement improvement initiatives that may yield rapid and far-reaching positive change.

**Key Findings**

Using data from a robust sample of 3,062 United States acute care hospitals, Press Ganey’s research team conducted a Hierarchical Variable Clustering Analysis on all eight HCAHPS dimensions. This type of analysis is different from a traditional correlation analysis, which looks at the relationship between two measures only. The variable clustering technique identifies multiple measures that “hang together” consistently, and the hierarchical analysis identifies which measure (or cluster of measures) leads the others.

The objective of the analysis can be likened to a statistician’s version of “Follow the Leader” that answers a step-wise series of research questions:

1. Which HCAHPS dimension is the leader?
2. Which dimensions follow the leader?
3. In what order do the other dimensions follow?
4. How closely do the other dimensions follow?

The answers to these questions allow hospitals to strategically focus their performance improvement resources on high-impact issues.

Press Ganey’s analysis identified five HCAHPS dimensions that consistently cluster together:

- Communication with Nurses
- Responsiveness of Hospital Staff
- Pain Management
- Communication about Medication
- Overall Rating

As depicted in Figure 1, Communication with Nurses leads the other four measures. This means that when a hospital aims improvement efforts on the Communication with Nurses dimension, it likely will see associated gains in performance in the other four dimensions in the cluster.

**FIGURE 1. THE RISING TIDE MEASURE: COMMUNICATION WITH NURSES**
Just how much associated gain will a hospital see in the other dimensions’ performance? It depends upon how statistically close a particular measure is to Communication with Nurses. To use the “Follow the Leader” analogy again, the rate of change and degree of change in performance will likely be greater for Responsiveness of Hospital Staff — which follows Communication with Nurses very closely — than it would be for the Overall Rating which is farthest behind the “leader” of the cluster.

Figure 1 also depicts how the measures in the cluster are likely to influence each other as illustrated by the brackets. Specifically, Communication with Nurses and Responsiveness of Hospital Staff together have a high likelihood of influencing Pain Management. These three measures then will have a likelihood of influencing Communication about Medication. Finally, it is the full force of the four — Communication with Nurses, Responsiveness of Hospital Staff, Pain Management, and Communication about Medication — that influence the Overall Rating. As the industry moves towards a continuum of care model, the role of nurses and nurse communication will become even more important.

The Benefits of Improving Communication Between Nurses and Patients
It should come as no surprise that nurse communication has surfaced as a rising tide measure. The vast majority of the encounters that patients likely take into consideration when evaluating hospital performance on the Responsiveness of Hospital Staff, Pain Management, and Communication about Medication dimensions happen largely within the context of their interactions with nurses.

The effects of improving performance on the Communication with Nurses dimension will likely have positive implications that reach beyond the VBP program. Ample academic literature points to strong associations between levels of performance on these dimensions and clinical areas of interest that are evaluated in CMS’ other payment programs, such as:

- Improved treatment compliance
- Reduced 30-day readmission rates for heart attack, heart failure, and pneumonia patients
- Lower inpatient mortality rates among Acute Myocardial Infarction patients
- Lower rates of certain hospital acquired conditions including patient falls, decubitus ulcers, and hospital-acquired infections

Further, Press Ganey research demonstrates an association between hospital performance on HCAHPS in general and in the CMS Readmissions Reduction program, another accountability program under which hospitals have a portion of the base operating diagnosis-related group (DRG) payment at risk (see Figure 2).
Press Ganey Observations and Recommendations

Making investments that improve communications between nurses and patients does more than improve performance on the various accountability and payment programs. It is central to a hospital’s ability to provide truly patient-centered care and positions the hospital to successfully meet the goals of CMS’ Triple Aim and the National Quality Strategy.

There are several best practices associated with solid performance on the Communication with Nurses dimension and the dimensions that are strongly associated with it. These include consistent and purposeful hourly rounding, bedside shift reporting, use of scripts, post-discharge phone calls, hiring nursing candidates who exhibit strong interpersonal skills, and providing service skills training with periodic reinforcement. Some of these best practices are common sense in nature, while others represent a fundamentally different approach to patient management than may be practiced at many hospitals.

Implementing and sustaining these best practices requires more than training and tools. It requires a culture that promotes individual responsibility and accountability for delivering patient-centered care. It also entails an ongoing commitment by the organization to fully implement the best practice strategies; this means fully engaging stakeholders in the importance and benefits of the practices, as well as monitoring success, addressing shortfalls, and celebrating successes.

About the Study

The study was completed using data from 3,062 United States acute care hospitals in the CMS Hospital Compare Database. The data were collected between October 1, 2009, and September 30, 2010, and were analyzed by performing a Hierarchical Variable Clustering Analysis on all eight HCAHPS dimensions.

Additional Resources


About Press Ganey: Transforming the Patient Experience

For nearly 30 years, Press Ganey’s mission has been to support health care providers in understanding and improving the entire patient experience. As a strategic business partner to more than 10,000 health care organizations across the country and across the continuum of care, we are the leader in helping create continuous, sustainable improvement.

Press Ganey serves clients nationwide with locally based teams of associates to ensure strong client connections and relationships. As a result, Press Ganey is acutely aware of the challenges and opportunities unique to specific providers and their communities. Our associates are professionals, deeply rooted in health care and strongly committed to our clients’ success.

Whether it’s in a hospital, medical practice, ambulatory or home care setting, we partner with clients to capture the voice of the patient and apply advanced analytics to identify targeted opportunities to improve the patient experience. Our comprehensive suite of health care solutions helps clients meet their goals of improved quality, better care and lower costs.

Press Ganey provides both ongoing advisory services and consulting in all phases of performance improvement. Our patient experience advisors are uniquely trained and skilled to identify areas of opportunity and help clients implement targeted improvement plans. Our consultants, whose health care experience is a true differentiator, work in partnership with organizations to identify and implement best practices across their operations.

Simply put, we support the mission of our clients to deliver better care, and are dedicated to helping understand and improve every dimension of the patient experience.

To learn more about how Press Ganey can help your organization gain a competitive edge in transforming the patient experience, visit www.pressganey.com.