

An ACE for South Philly *Acute Care for the Elderly (ACE) unit makes all the difference at Methodist Hospital*

Older adults are incredibly vulnerable in the acute hospital setting. Bedrest orders or concerns regarding mobility often keep older adults in bed for much of their hospital stay. The challenges of incontinence leave them susceptible to the use of catheters and thus infections or skin breakdown. Their frailty and poor nutrition puts them at risk for injury. An acute hospital stay can be devastating to older adults, leaving them debilitated and at increased risk for falls, and sometimes hastening the need for placement in a skilled nursing facility or nursing home.

In 2011, the leadership at Methodist Hospital, in South Philadelphia took note that the hospital was treating an increasing number of older adults. After 3 years of visiting other hospital systems and attending geriatric conferences to research best practices, the Acute Care of the Elderly (ACE) Unit at Methodist was born. The ACE Unit is dedicated to geriatric patients (over the age of 65) and offers care provided by teams that have been specially trained to meet the unique needs of this population. With strong support from hospital administration, a passionate team of nurses work collaboratively with nursing assistants, physical and occupational therapists, physicians, physician assistants, case managers and a geriatric nurse practitioner, to address geriatric syndromes while simultaneously treating acute medical issues. Now, almost four years after its inception, certificates of excellence line the walls as a testament to the outstanding quality of care that is delivered.

Focused on socialization and mobilization, ACE units are designed to prevent functional decline and related complications in older adults admitted to the hospital for an acute event. Patients admitted to ACE units have been found to experience fewer falls, less delirium, less functional decline at discharge, shorter length of hospital stay, lower costs and more discharges directly to home, as opposed to a nursing home.

On Methodist's ACE unit, the staff encourage patients to move as much as they are able, supervising walks in the halls, and helping them to the bathroom when needed, all with the goal of being able to return home. The importance of maintaining an older person's mobility and function cannot be overstated. Nurses and nursing assistants motivate patients through visual measurements on the wall to track distance and encourage patients to have lunch together in a communal parlor. Socialization and ambulation, which are cornerstones of the program, not only help maintain strength and balance but have a significant impact on preventing confusion that can frequently happen to older adults in the hospital. When possible, catheters are avoided so that patients can be given the opportunity to use the toilet and increase their strength and mobility. Each patient has a bed or chair alarm on and are reminded often to call so that they do not ambulate alone. Nursing staff keep highly vigilant about the safety of each patient, noting especially during handoffs those who are especially vulnerable for falls, such as patients who have memory issues, are impulsive, or are on risky medications.

The environment on the unit is very soothing and comforting, with low-glare wood floors, private rooms, handrails throughout for support, and shower chairs in each room. The community room allows patients to socialize and play games such as cards or bingo. The culture on the unit is palpably positive. Nurses and nursing assistants are constantly in communication about the needs of patients, expressing any concerns to other team members to ensure that the full picture of the person's health is being addressed. Interdisciplinary patient-centered rounds twice a week ensure that patients and families are kept informed about their care and progress in the hospital and give the geriatric team time to focus on issues specific to older adults— notably skin integrity, mobility, cognition, sleep, bowel and bladder, and nutrition.

The results have been outstanding. Patients admitted to the ACE unit experience fewer hospital-related complications and tend not to stay admitted as long as a regular hospital unit. Patient satisfaction scores are around 90% and rank among the highest in the hospital. The idea to keep community-dwelling older adults active while hospitalized has paid off for patients, who experience fewer complications, and for the staff, who are consistently satisfied with the autonomy they have in their practice and ability to make nursing care decisions. The care sounds revolutionary, but feels part of the everyday culture on the ACE unit.

Jefferson Methodist Hospital is a NICHE designated organization. NICHE, which stands for Nurses Improving Care for

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Jefferson College of Population Health

Fall 2018

Vol. 31, No. 2

Healthsystem Elders, is a nursing education and consultation program designed to improve geriatric care in healthcare organizations. Aside from the ACE unit, geriatric resource nurses on other hospital units can use their training to advocate for appropriate care for each older adult. Given

the increase in the proportion of older adults in the US population, hospitals will undoubtedly be making changes to care for this population. An ACE unit has proven to be a great resource in this endeavor. Older adults deserve nothing less.

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