Promoting Professionalism and Reducing Staff Turnover in Respiratory Care

In today’s health-care environment, especially in acute-care hospitals, there is high and increasing pressure to reduce costs. This is important because, with increasing life expectancy (in the United States it increased from 75.37 years in 1990 to 77.2 years in 2002) and the aging of the baby boomer population, more people and a higher percentage of the population will need health care in the coming years. The demand for health care is straining the system at the same time that we are trying to reduce costs. Respiratory therapists (RTs) now must do more with less, so we need to find more efficient methods while seeking to improve patient outcomes.

The experience of Orens and colleagues is encouraging to me as a longtime RT and manager, because I have found human resources to be one of the most difficult aspects of my job. The Cleveland Clinic’s respiratory care consult service has created an environment of RT professionalism, by which I mean that the RTs in that department have both mastery of technical knowledge and the authorization to apply that knowledge in various situations, using independent, critical thinking, patient assessment, and situation analysis. That professionalism is an important component of job satisfaction, and The Cleveland Clinic has a low rate of RT personnel turnover (5% in 2001).

A high employee turnover rate is expensive for an institution. The costs are in 2 categories: separation costs and replacement costs. Replacement costs (the greater of the two) include sourcing costs, human-resources costs of finding and assessing candidates, the time spent by managers interviewing candidates, and orientation and training costs. In some organizations, replacement costs may also include travel and relocation costs and/or sign-on bonuses. Other costs, which are more difficult to quantify, include lower productivity because the new employee might work slower and might make more mistakes while in training.

In another health-care organization, employees listed the following as strategies that help minimize turnover: a work environment that promotes full use of employees’ skills; opportunities to learn new skills; coaching and counseling from supervisors and leaders; and ongoing training. All of those strategies are in use at the Cleveland Clinic, whose experience provides a blueprint for other respiratory care departments to follow.

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REFERENCES

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