

Article published Oct 23, 2006

Tried and true: Blount Memorial improves services with new scientific method

By Melanie Tucker
of The Daily Times Staff

Blount Memorial Hospital is being used as a test case for medical facilities across the nation after achieving successful results in a recent project designed to improve efficiency and patient satisfaction.

The hospital teamed up with QualPro Inc., a process improvement company in Oak Ridge, that has helped Fortune 500 companies like DuPont, Cingular and Circuit City with similar issues. QualPro has developed a scientific equation called Multivariable Testing. Blount Memorial used MVT to improve conditions in its emergency room and operating rooms.

Dr. Samuel Evans, medical director at BMH, said the results from this project were much better than expected.

"We have been frustrated for many years," Evans explained. "The health care industry is a very difficult industry to make changes in because it influences so many people — not just hospital staff but patients and their families. For us to make a change is a big deal."

And the traditional methods used to implement change have been too time consuming. Sometimes you take someone else's good idea, implement it and find out it's not a good idea for your hospital, Evans said. You go back to square one. In the end, you decide to give up.

In contrast, Blount Memorial worked with QualPro for four months and came up with several helpful ideas that are now part of protocol. The ideas that tested out to be hurtful were thrown out.

It takes a village

Evans and the staff at the hospital began the process with brainstorming sessions. Everyone from surgeons, anesthesiologists, nurses, scrub technicians, transporters and housekeepers were involved. The purpose was to come up with ideas that would then be tested to see if they met the hospital's criteria: low-cost, practical, easy to implement and safe procedures that would improve efficiency and patient satisfaction.

In the OR we had 227 ideas and in the ER we had 121," Evans said. Using the hospital's criteria, those were then narrowed down to 22 and 16.

The remaining suggestions were then tested over a five-week period. Kathy Romero, director of surgical services, said she and others were surprised at some of the results.

For example, one idea tested was for the ER to call the floor or lab ahead of time and give a specific time for tasks to be completed. Romero said it sounded like a time-saving idea. Testing showed, however, that this didn't improve efficiency and actually hurt it.

By using the MVT method to narrow down the positive ideas and eliminate the negative ones, Blount Memorial was able to reduce patient wait time by 24 percent, improve patient rating of pain management by 26.5 percent, increase patient likelihood to recommend BMH's ER by 15.9 percent and reduce OR non-productive time by 42.7 percent.

Put into practice

New ideas implemented in the Emergency Room included moving patients to a holding area from the ER if those patients were going to be admitted to the hospital; asking the ER doctors to do a pre-discharge visit; and making sure to keep a clean bed ready at all times for ER patients.

Evans said one idea he thought was a good one turned out to be the opposite. It involved the ER doctor coming into the room, smiling, shaking hands with the patient and sitting down.

"In the ER, people are scared, in pain, hurt and anxious," Evans said. "They don't want to establish a relationship with a doctor. They want something done. I think that's what that was."

In the operating room, things like having a large board at the control desk to list cases so everyone could see and bringing patients into the OR holding area 60 minutes ahead of time instead of only 30, were found to have positive results.

QualPro has tested over 150,000 different improvement ideas since 1982. It has found that 25 percent of ideas help, 22 percent hurt and 53 percent make no difference. That statistic held true for BMH.

"Our work with Blount Memorial is extremely important because it reinforces that MVT, widely known for its results in business, is also needed and can produce rapid results in the health care sector," said Dr. Charles Holland, CEO of QualPro Inc. in a press release.

B.J. Ashworth, education quality coordinator for surgical services, said BMH was the only hospital currently participating in the QualPro testing method. She and other staffers attended a symposium and felt the spotlight.

"We felt like pioneers," she said. "All of the other people there were business people, not health care. We were the only ones."

QualPro does plan to use these results at BMH as a way to encourage other hospitals to take advantage of the process.

Stats don't lie

This statistical approach and its time-saving qualities are something Lori Rizzo, performance improvement coordinator for quality management, can appreciate. She said doing things the old way — using anecdotal evidence — can take so much time.

"Health care changes so quickly we are looking for things where you can come in quickly," she said. "This is fact-based. You can take it to the bank. That's what is so attractive about this."

Evans said the hospital will be working with QualPro on another project involving block scheduling in the operating room.

It has been a whole new approach, Evans said. Everybody feels like they have input and everybody feels like someone is listening to them.

Romero agreed, adding that people in the day-to-day tasks are the ones who come up with the best ideas.

"These are homegrown ideas," she said.