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Lean thinking promotes patient-centric care

Adapting efficient manufacturing practices improves patient safety and satisfaction

BY WILLIAM WILBURN



LEAN SIX SIGMA—a process originally developed at Motorola to improve manufacturing processes—has found its way into today’s hospitals and is having a dramatic effect on patient safety and satisfaction. Focusing on everything from quicker lab test turnarounds to reducing infections, Lean Six Sigma is an approach to improving processes so that everything workers do provides value to the patient.

“Lean Six Sigma in healthcare focuses on delivering on patients’ needs—what they want, when they want it and how they want it—with as little waste as possible,” said Alora Brock, director of Lean Six Sigma operations at Cancer Treatment Centers of America® (CTCA) at Eastern Regional Medical Center in Philadelphia. “As non-value-added activities are identified and eliminated,” she said, “employees can focus on what they are here for—the safe, timely and high-quality delivery of care to patients.”

CONSTANTLY LEARNING FROM PATIENT FEEDBACK

“All CTCA employees will be trained in lean thinking through the A3 Performance Improvement Program^(SM),” Brock said. “It is a seven-week class we have developed where workers learn about lean thinking while working on an actual project in their area using the A3 problem-solving tool. We are constantly getting feedback from our patients through many avenues, including focus groups, surveys and informal communication, and then using their feedback and applying the Lean Six Sigma tools and improvement methodology to resolve any opportunities that were identified.”

Shortening the time it takes to receive test results has also been a priority. “We work to reduce turnaround times, which directly correlates with patient wait times,” Brock said. “Many of our patients travel long distances to our hospitals, so it’s important to ensure we are as efficient

as possible so they can get everything they need during their visit. By evaluating our end-to-end processes, we shorten the time to get lab results or diagnostics.”

Tumor marker results are used not only in the detection of cancer, but in determining best treatment options and then monitoring patients’ response to treatment. For all those reasons, including that it has a direct impact on patient wait time, it is important to have accurate and timely results. Through a Six Sigma green belt project, CTCA was able to reduce tumor marker turnaround time to less than 75 minutes. This project was recently presented during a poster board session at the Institute for Healthcare Improvement’s Annual Quality Forum under the category of Patient-Centered Care.

PATIENTS SEE A DIRECT BENEFIT

Alaine Stevens said she appreciates this approach. “When you go there you’re in one building,” she said. “You see all

the doctors in one day and you get it all done. When I was seeing people here [in Springfield], one doctor would schedule one day, another doctor another day. I was spending a lot of time going back and forth to doctors. It's three hours to go to CTCA at Southwestern Regional Medical Center in Tulsa, Okla., so it's important that you get everything done efficiently. I was treated every other week, and it was great."

Patients have waited as long as an hour and 40 minutes in the past for lab count test results before they have been able to start treatment. But by implementing Lean Six Sigma, CTCA patients have been able to receive their test results in under 75 minutes. "This directly impacts patient wait time, because they cannot

proceed with their treatment until we are certain their lab counts are all at appropriate levels," Brock said.

"We look at everything from the moment the patient's lab work is drawn until their results are delivered. We identify and eliminate forms of waste occurring that don't add any value for the patient.

"The longer it takes to get the results back, the more anxious the patients are," Brock said. "The less time they wait for the results the greater their peace of mind."

Applying the principles of Lean Six Sigma has also allowed the hospital to eliminate redundant processes. For example, CTCA found through patient feedback that many returning patients didn't value filling out registration forms

each time they visited. Therefore, CTCA moved around key steps in the registration process and implemented an express check-in system. Patients can now proceed to their first appointment while much of the registration process takes place behind the scenes, according to Brock.

"Using Lean Six Sigma tools to identify the root causes of patient falls has enabled us to make changes that have significantly reduced and prevented the occurrence of patient falls," Brock noted. "A project to reduce blood stream infections was also successfully completed and submitted by the Office of the Inspector General to the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid as consideration for best practice." **CFThrive**

BUILDING LEAN PRACTICES INTO NEW MEDICAL CENTER

WHEN HE HAD THE CHANCE to build a hospital from scratch, David Veillette, president and CEO of the new Cancer Treatment Centers of America (CTCA) at Western Regional Medical Center in Goodyear, Ariz., near Phoenix, enlisted the input of staff and patients to help him create their ideal health care setting.

"I sat down with teams at the Cancer Treatment Centers of America at Southwestern Regional Medical Center to try to understand our cancer-treatment model," Veillette said. "We'd get a group of staff in an area and say, 'If you didn't have any restrictions on what you were doing, how would you care for a patient the most efficient way?' Then we started listing things that would make their lives better."

Veillette worked with both caregivers and patient focus groups to understand what they felt would make their life better in the clinic. Among the innovations:

AN ALL-DIGITAL ENVIRONMENT.

"As we look at lean processes, the nurses waste a tremendous amount of time and energy going back and forth to a nursing station in order to get patient information and paperwork," Veillette said. "The new hospital will have computers in every room and outside rooms, and the nurses will have portable equipment

to take to the bedside of patients, eliminating typical nurse's stations."

ADOPTING A UNIVERSAL ROOM CONCEPT

Essentially, every patient room is intensive-care-unit-capable. That allows patients to be assigned to one room for an entire hospital stay, even if they get sick or need intensive care. "In traditional health care you move the patient around the building to the areas of care instead of moving the care to the patient," Veillette said. "With our new model, the patient will stay in one room during their entire stay."

The advantages include consistency of health care, ease of finding the patient, and reduced medical errors and infections associated with transferring a patient from location to location.

AN EVOLVED CLINIC MODEL

"As we looked at the clinical model we saw how a patient was seen by a physician and was taken from place to place to place to see the other people they needed to meet—the complementary medicines staff, the care managers and such," Veillette said. "That model was not as effective and efficient as it could be. We've reconfigured it so the patient doesn't have to be moved around, but we move everybody to

the patient and make it better for them.

"When we designed our care management and our clinical model, we designed a whole new concept called the hope model. It creates a convenient and consistent team of caregivers for every patient. When a patient is admitted they are assigned to a physician, and that physician has his or her own care managers. He has an office, three or four exam rooms, and space for consultation," Veillette explained.

"This allows the same team of people to be working with that patient, increasing the patient's comfort level because they're seeing the same nurse, the same doctor, the same care managers. This model allows the patient to stay in that exam room during the initial examination. The naturopathic doctor, the nutritionist, the mind-body therapist and pastoral care, all of those support services come to the patient in that exam room, versus the patient being sent from the exam room to each of those areas."

As the newest addition to the family of CTCA regional medical centers, the Goodyear facility is leading the implementation of the Lean Six Sigma philosophy at CTCA. Lessons learned there may be adapted at other regional medical centers as CTCA continues to refine its ability to battle cancer while keeping patients first.