

Program to cut drug errors is setting example for VHA

VHA New England is conducting a Medication Error Prevention Initiative (MEPI) in partnership with Quantros, a provider of real-time data collection and assessment. The initiative was created to help VHA New England organizations identify and prevent medication errors. VHA New England is part of VHA, a national network of 2,200 community-owned healthcare organizations.

The program began in September 2000, just before the Institute of Medicine's report on medical errors came out, said Arnold Mattis, R.N., EdD. He is senior director for education and consulting services for VHA New England.

At that time, the Institute for Safe Medication Practices (ISMP) conducted a survey on self-assessment for medication errors. All hospitals in the United States were asked to take part and identify risks based on 194 "best practices," he said. VHA New England decided to base MEPI on that survey and use the survey to evaluate progress against medication errors. "We have 20 hospitals participating," he said.

MEPI is designed to help implement the ISMP's best practices, such as getting patients to present their ID bracelets for positive identification before they are given a medication and training staff to avoid the use of confusing abbreviations on prescriptions, Mattis said.

Data from MEPI are collected, then analyzed by Quantros, and rapidly made available to the individual participants in a blinded fashion via a database on the Internet. "The initiative is part of a clinical performance initiative VHA conducts with its

membership," said Sanjaya Kumar, MD, chief medical officer for Quantros. It brings together MEPI members who can then collaborate on and identify the best practices for preventing errors and assess them periodically, he said.

A key part of MEPI has been the creation of a task force with a representative from each of the participating VHA facilities. These facilities are located in Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, and Vermont.

"We had an improvement of greater than 20% in scores."

Arnold Mattis R.N., EdD
VHA New England

"By design, the task force is multidisciplinary. We wanted an accumulation of all types of knowledge," Mattis said. Members include pharmacists, nurses, nurse managers, administrators, and physicians.

The task force meets monthly and has been working its way through the list of best practices, with each meeting covering several items, Mattis said. Data from the individual institutions are discussed in an unblinded manner at the meetings. Minutes are taken at each meeting, and the discussion is then distilled into the best method of accomplishing a given task.

These discussions are ultimately made part of the database on the Internet, which all MEPI members can access. The Internet database is kept blinded in case the Web site is hacked, he noted.

Each organization taking part is free to select ideas from MEPI to take back and implement in its facility, Mattis said. Not every method can be used in every facility and there have been instances where what worked well in one institution did not work as well in another. Some of the best methods discussed by the MEPI task force have involved technology that not all of the organizations have, he said.

The monthly meetings have been very successful, Mattis commented. "The participants have found the process rich and informative." People on the task force have developed an understanding of and deep trust in each other, he added. Some have even started bringing other people from their hospitals to the meetings.

"That is a factor in its success—that VHA has involved the key people at each institution and allowed them to interact collaboratively," Kumar said.

The performance of MEPI was measured recently. Participants in MEPI conducted a second survey in July 2002, a time less than two years after the initiative started. We had an improvement of greater than 20% in scores," Mattis said.

When Quantros was invited in after MEPI was already under way, VHA New England decided that it needed faster data analysis, said Kumar. Now, as soon as the data come in, Quantros immediately analyzes the information and makes it available to MEPI participants.

Nationally, VHA has been watching what VHA New England is doing and believes the idea has merit, said Mattis. MEPI will eventually be expanded nationally to all members of VHA.