



WETZEL COUNTY HOSPITAL

Press Release

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

From: GEORGE COUCH, CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER
Date: AUGUST 16, 2007
Phone: 304-455-8111

PHOTO ATTACHED – (SHOWN LEFT TO RIGHT) DEBBIE BOSLEY, R.N. NURSING SUPERVISOR; MARGE KNIGHT, R.N.-CHIEF OF OUTPATIENT SERVICES AND ARLENE SUMMERS, R.N.-CHIEF OF INPATIENT SERVICES

WETZEL COUNTY HOSPITAL RECOGNIZED FOR SAFETY INITIATIVE

New Martinsville, WV – Wetzel County Hospital was recently recognized for its participation in the West Virginia Medical Institute's patient safety project, "Partnering to Improve Patient Safety in Rural West Virginia," which was one of four in the nation featured at a conference sponsored by the Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality (AHRQ) in Washington, D.C.

Under the grant, the Wetzel County Hospital and other rural hospitals have been equipped with software and technology to record medical errors and "near misses" (errors that could have happened but were averted). For their efforts, hospitals receive educational opportunities, reports of system-wide "near misses" and opportunities to share lessons learned and improvements that lead to better, safer health care.

"We have been able to identify particular events, or trends, which have helped us improve care to our patients and implement practices that increase safety throughout the hospital," said Wetzel County Hospital CEO George Couch. "By reducing or eliminating these risks it benefits our patients, staff, physicians and the entire hospital."

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The three-year AHRQ grant has stimulated broad participation by small, rural hospitals across the state in an online patient safety network designed to prevent medical errors. Twenty-eight hospitals currently take part in the program; prior to the AHRQ grant, only six had signed up.

"What is extraordinary is that more than 50 percent of West Virginia hospitals are participating and they're doing so voluntarily," says Patricia Ruddick, MSN, project director at the West Virginia Medical Institute (WVMI), the quality improvement organization that oversees the patient safety program. "Some states that want to adopt these systems have had to pass laws mandating participation."

John G. Brehm, MD, Chief Medical Officer at WVMI, explains that the program was designed to pinpoint and correct common problems that can lead to tragic outcomes. That required, as he puts it, "strength in numbers." But in a state where so many hospitals have less than 25 beds, the only way to get those numbers was to create a single system for fielding reports from multiple facilities. And that meant wiring remote, financially strapped hospitals for high-speed Internet connections and then training staff, many of whom were new to IT, on how to use special reporting software.

Sounds daunting, but WVMI, leading a public-private partnership that includes the state, the state's hospital association, an IT vendor (Quantros, Inc.), and Verizon, has made it happen. To date, participating hospitals have contributed to a database that has catalogued more than 24,000 "events," information that WVMI and hospital staff has used to identify errors and determine how to prevent future errors.

According to Ruddick, online reporting can have a powerful effect on hospital practices. Before joining the program, she says, most hospitals relied on a paper-based system to flag possible errors. And it wasn't uncommon for those papers to get lost in the shuffle or fail to reach the person who could accurately assess the severity of the situation.

The new reporting system makes it easy for any employee - a doctor, a nurse, even housekeeping staff - to stop at a computer terminal and report a potential problem, and for supervisors to receive an immediate email alert. For example, at one hospital, a nurse used the system to report what seemed to be a minor, isolated incident involving non-sterile equipment.

But a hospital manager who read the alert saw it as an indication of a potentially far-reaching safety concern. He immediately issued a broad recall of equipment that might be contaminated.

Meanwhile, on the other end of the system, WVMI staff aggregate data from participating hospitals to analyze how rates of events such as patient falls and drug reactions compare with national trends. In some cases, the data are used to increase hospitals' attention to problems that might be rooted in medical errors.

Gail Bellamy, PhD, principal investigator on the AHRQ grant, says that hospitals are seeing the benefits of consistent, accessible, and real-time reporting of patient safety issues. The challenge now lies in the program's future. Bellamy says that hospitals also need to see the connection between improving patient safety and improving their financial stability.

Wetzel County Hospital is a licensed and accredited, 68-bed facility, offering comprehensive acute care inpatient, outpatient services, emergency department and transitional care unit. The hospital is located 35 miles south of Wheeling and 60 miles north of Parkersburg, West Virginia.

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