Cultural Competency Education at Meridian Health, New Jersey

Overview:
Meridian Health is a leading not-for-profit health care organization in New Jersey, comprised of six hospitals, nursing and rehabilitation centers and outpatient centers. Diversity is a core value at Meridian and is central to achieving its mission and vision. Meridian’s diversity statement is displayed throughout all facilities: Meridian Health strives to create an environment in which the uniqueness of each person is valued, and where everyone is treated with dignity and respect without regard to race, gender, age, national origin, ethnic background, disability, religion, culture or sexual orientation. Meridian’s leadership believes that cultural competence should be viewed as health care competence, such that health providers are equally therapeutic with patients from any social context or cultural background.

Intervention:
At Meridian Health, 17 percent of patients are from racially and ethnically diverse groups. Knowledge of cultural customs enables Meridian nurses to offer better care and avoid misunderstandings. Most importantly, this knowledge provides the foundation for specific assessments of individual patients, families and communities, allowing staff to move beyond “one-size-fits-all” approaches toward the provision of culturally competent care. Care that is congruent with patient’s cultural background and expectations is imperative for positive patient outcomes. Cultural competency also extends to positive and informed interactions among staff.

To empower its nurses to provide culturally competent care, Meridian’s “Cultural Ambassador” program was implemented in 2011. The goals of the program are to:
- build positive nurse-patient relationships;
- increase nurses’ confidence to understand the cultural context of health behaviors; and
- increase sensitivity and learn cultural nuances associated with the decision-making process and health care preferences.

Meridian’s cultural ambassadors are nurses who serve as role models for other staff by championing cultural best care practices and protocols, while assisting colleagues and other health care workers with cultural competencies, with an emphasis on improving care and outcomes for patients. Cultural ambassadors are the “go to” staff for each Meridian nursing unit for culturally appropriate resources and questions on providing culturally competent care.

Results:
Cultural competence topics were selected by surveying Meridian’s cultural ambassadors to identify the most challenging cultural issues typically encountered in their nursing units.

Delivered through quarterly workshops, these have included:
- Introduction to Cultural Competence and Cultural Sensitivity
- Understanding and Utilizing Available Language Assistance Services / Latino Culture
- Workplace Respect and Cross-Cultural Sensitivity: Effectively Handling Offensive Remarks and Behavior from Patients and Co-workers
- Caring for Muslim Patients
- Caring for Transgender Older Adults: “Are You Prepared to Care for the LGBT Patient?”
- Asian-Americans: The Fastest Growing Immigrant Group
African-Americans and Their Health Concerns: A Fresh Look
Caring for Observant Jewish Patients and End-of-Life Values in the Jewish Faith
Tanenbaum Group Workshop: Improving Religio-Cultural Competence in Patient Care
Effective Communication with Our Deaf Patients
The LGBT Community Across the Lifespan
Understanding Asian-Indian Culture
Effective Communication: A Refresher on Meridian’s Language Assistance Programs
Missing the Point: The Impact of Low Health Literacy on Patient Care

Through these workshops, as well as one-on-one support from trained nurses, Meridian’s Cultural Ambassador program continues to have a positive impact on delivering culturally competent, sensitive and effective care to patients, as well as improved intercultural communication between employees.

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