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Implementation of a Pediatric Observation Nurse Staffing Strategy to Decrease Length of Stay

PURPOSE

The purpose of the quality improvement project was to decrease the average length of stay (LOS) for observation patients by 5% from the baseline.

BACKGROUND

Dedicated observation units have been shown to improve efficiencies in care and reduce the LOS for observation patients. The setting was a large pediatric hospital in Texas that has experienced challenges with patient flow and throughput.

METHODOLOGY

A nursing staffing strategy was implemented on one acute care unit where an observation nurse was assigned each shift to provide care to observation status patients. The observation nurse was focused on removing discharge barriers and monitoring progress toward medical milestones required for discharge. Staff received education regarding observation care and the goal of the nursing staffing strategy. Each shift the charge nurse assigned at least one observation nurse.

RESULTS

The average length of stay for observation patients was reduced by 72 minutes (4.1%) from 29 hours to 27 hours and 48 minutes. While a 5% reduction was not achieved the implementation of a designated observation nurse was successful at decreasing LOS and improving patient flow. The project was implemented during the COVID-19 pandemic on a COVID designated inpatient unit which may have limited the effectiveness of the project.

IMPLICATIONS

A designated nursing staffing strategy for observation patients was shown to reduce the average LOS. Staff training and assignment of accountability were key to the success of the project. This project should be replicated on other pediatric acute care units with fewer COVID positive patients. Additionally, the opening of a dedicated observation unit may create a more sustainable reduction in the LOS for observation patients.