Telepharmacy helps Ontario community hospital provide 24/7 service

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ST THOMAS ELGIN GENERAL HOSPITAL (STEGH), a 166-bed community hospital located in southwestern Ontario, provides comprehensive 24-hour coverage in internal medicine, surgery, obstetrics, pediatrics, anesthesia, emergency and family medicine.

To support this level of care, the hospital implemented a 24/7 hospital pharmacy service in early 2013. The pharmacy service now supports comprehensive medication care that includes unit dose packaging, automatic dispensing cabinets and the support of a clinical pharmacist around the clock.

A STEGH team is in the planning stage for implementation of a computerized physician order entry (CPOE) system within the scope of the regional HUGO project.

The HUGO (Healthcare Undergoing Optimization) project involves 10 hospitals across southern Ontario adopting advanced technologies to shift from paper to electronic processes, including computerized physician order entry for tests and prescribing medications.

An electronic bedside bar-coding system will also be used to ensure that the right patient is receiving the right medication at the right time. The 24/7 pharmacy service capabilities will support the various medication safety standards that are part of the HUGO project.

At press time, STEGH was scheduled to go live with CPOE in January 2014 along with four other local hospitals.

Dr Nancy Whitmore, vice president of medical affairs and the chief of staff at STEGH, was instrumental in working with the physicians and surgeon group at STEGH to plan for the CPOE system. “Our medical staff are ready to go,” said Dr. Whitmore. “They all see how CPOE will continue to improve our clinical services at STEGH.”

For its part, the pharmacy leadership team at STEGH wanted to ensure that a
well-established 24/7 pharmacy service was in place for the go-live date.

“With the assistance of telepharmacist services, we are now in a position to be ready for the next steps of CPOE,” said Anita Grant, former manager of pharmacy services. “We have developed standard operating procedures and we’ve scheduled staff to perform many of the manufacturing duties during the night shift, which allows us to be an onsite, 24/7 service.”

Many Canadian hospitals are assessing the feasibility of moving to a 24/7 pharmacy service model. Hospitals have hesitated due to the perceived increase cost to provide such a service.

However, as pharmacy services are required around the clock, there is an opportunity to refine the staffing model to distribute staff and pharmacy activity throughout a 24 hour day.

At STEGH, pharmacy assistants perform order entry, medication packaging, dispensing, and delivery responsibilities around the clock and address any automated dispensing cabinet issues. The pharmacists perform the cognitive review of the patient medication profile to identify potential errors, omissions, or dangerous drug-drug interactions.

STEGH’s previous pharmacy staffing model utilized the services of North West Telepharmacy Solutions (NTS), the leading telepharmacist provider of remote clinical pharmacist services across Canada. The NTS pharmacists supported the onsite pharmacists during business hours performing the physician order review process.

In 2013, STEGH adjusted the telepharmacist coverage so that NTS pharmacists remotely assisted in the support of a 24/7 model for physician order review and timely patient medication access.

During the day (8 am – 4 pm), NTS pharmacists remotely review physician orders, allowing the on-site hospital pharmacists to address pharmaceutical issues. After 4 pm and overnight until 8 am, NTS pharmacists are providing both physician order review and clinical coverage remotely, including an on-call service, allowing nurses and physicians to access a pharmacist after hours.

Kevin McDonald, senior manager at NTS, said the growth of telepharmacy services over the next several years will be driven by the 2014 Accreditation Canada Standard, which requires a hospital pharmacist to be available 24 hours a day.

This is a logical time for hospitals to look at expanding their hours of pharmacy operation with their own resources or considering the use of North West Telepharmacy Solutions.

“The nice thing about utilizing NTS for overnight coverage is that hospitals only need to pay for the coverage necessary for that site,” said McDonald. “We can offer a realistic and affordable solution to any hospital of any size.”

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