

WellMed Medical Group

Guidelines Help Texas Healthcare Provider Improve Care and Cut Costs

At a time when healthcare costs keep spiraling upward, using a best-practices approach across the care continuum can help providers shave expenses, deliver quality care, free up resources and boost patient satisfaction.

WellMed Medical Group, a physician-owned medical practice management company focusing on senior care in the San Antonio area, concentrated on reducing lengths of stay at skilled nursing facilities (SNFs) for its members facing total knee replacements.

While WellMed had managed over the years to trim average hospital stays after knee replacement surgery to two days, down from as much as eight days, its patients faced longer follow-up stays at SNFs. Time at that level of care had risen to as much as 20 days for some patients.

WellMed started focusing in 2003 on reducing the time patients spent at SNFs with the help of the *Milliman Care Guidelines*®. By treating patients more aggressively with physical therapy, increasing patient education, and addressing psychosocial needs, WellMed eliminated the SNF stay for most patients, instead allowing them to go home after a four-day hospital stay. By 2007, WellMed had saved \$2.7 million for the year by virtually eliminating the need for SNF stays for knee replacement surgery.

Containing a Growing Cost Center

WellMed serves 77,000 members, most of them seniors, giving it a significant market presence in south Texas. The provider serves one in five older adults eligible for Medicare in its market. Its mission is helping patients understand and control their health in a lifelong effort at wellness, with a focus on preventative healthcare.

In that vein, WellMed set out in 2003 to improve overall

inpatient recovery time for total knee replacement surgeries. The *Care Guidelines* provide the evidence-based day-by-day optimal progression for a four-day Goal Length of Stay, with physical therapy (PT) continuing at home or an outpatient facility. WellMed's preferred surgeon met with the hospital where he performed most of the surgeries. Hospital management agreed to work with WellMed, renovating rooms to more easily accommodate total knee replacement patients, and adding a gym in the orthopedic surgery wing.

About 45% of U.S. adults are at risk for developing knee osteoarthritis, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and total knee replacements can reduce pain and improve physical function. The number of knee replacements increased by 81 percent between 2000 and 2006, the latest year for which figures are available.

Guidelines Help Usher in Needed Change

To minimize inpatient stays at skilled nursing facilities, WellMed and the physician increased physical therapy aggressiveness before and after the operation. Medical personnel followed detailed *Care Guidelines* inpatient pathways, enabling the four-day post-operative hospital stay. WellMed used to discharge patients to an SNF after two days, but the extra two inpatient days allowed for more intensive therapy, and reduced SNF time, says Janet Newman, Manager, Case Management Services at WellMed.

"We maximized the recommended length of hospital stay so that the patient didn't have to go to the SNF," Newman said.

The more intensive treatment included one or two PT visits before the surgery. Post-surgery PT included one-on-one mobility exercises with a therapist, plus group classes covering general items such as handling

activities of daily living, from dressing to getting in and out of a car.

WellMed also addressed patient psychosocial needs by ensuring that a spouse, family member or friend could help with basic needs such as grocery shopping and other errands. WellMed also added preoperative clearances for cardiac and lung conditions to minimize surgical risks.

Solid, Measurable Results

Those efforts paid off. About 400 WellMed patients had knee replacements in 2007, with 85% discharged to home following a four-day hospital stay, replacing the previous pattern of two days in the hospital and 10 to 20 days in an SNF. In WellMed surveys, patient satisfaction with post-operative treatment increased to 96.3%, up from 90% or less at most clinics, correlating with a faster return to home, to walking and to normal day-to-day activities. The initiative also saved WellMed \$2.1 million due to the marked decrease in SNF use.

“We have minimized the overall costs,” Newman says. “We have been able to pass on the savings to our members.”

Improving the Efficiency of Healthcare Delivery

The reduced expenses allowed WellMed to invest the savings in other patient services, such as free transportation to medical appointments, free prescriptions for a disease management program, member vision and dental benefits, and state-of-the-art electronic medical records. Also, with fewer total knee replacement patients going to SNFs, case managers and doctors make fewer rounds at the sites, increasing staff efficiency, productivity and satisfaction.

By putting the *Care Guidelines* right at case managers' fingertips via laptop computers, the managers can use the guidelines in real time to assist in efficient and effective patient management. If there are disputes over procedures, personnel can rely on the guidelines' annotated bibliographies to justify actions.

“If case managers need to look at the pathway with a physician to support our decision-making, it is right there for them,” Newman said.

Better Care Across the Board

The success of the knee replacement initiative also led WellMed to expand use of the *Care Guidelines* to broader medical management. For example, WellMed's disease management program integrated the *Chronic Care Guidelines* into its patient management protocols. That program serves 4,000 Medicare-eligible seniors with disease states considered high risk, high volume and high cost, such as congestive heart failure, ischemic heart disease, diabetes, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD) and asthma.

For WellMed, the *Care Guidelines* have increased the quality of care for its members, while decreasing the level of complications along the way.

“The *Care Guidelines* have helped us optimize the level of care for our members,” Newman says. “Milliman continues to do the research and to develop and change along with the needs of our patients. WellMed's mission statement is to change the face of healthcare for seniors, and Milliman strives right along with us to meet that vision.”

For more information about Milliman Care Guidelines, visit www.careguidelines.com.