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## Ambulatory Nursing Practice

With the proliferation of ambulatory services across the country, ambulatory nursing has also grown into its own unique specialty. The American Academy of Ambulatory Care Nursing describes it as “a complex, multifaceted specialty that encompasses independent and collaborative practice” (AAACN, 2019). Froedtert Hospital ambulatory nurses work in a variety of ambulatory clinic and procedural settings to meet the needs of our patients. Telehealth nursing, providing patient care over the telephone, comprises a large proportion of our ambulatory nurses’ practice. In a substantial number of Froedtert Hospital clinics, patients who call with questions find that their phone call is answered directly by a nurse. “Live” telephone triage entails the nurses proactively answering calls versus responding to messages left on a voicemail. Our patients have benefited from an increasing number of clinics expanding their services to live triage.

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It takes a unique set of astute assessment and critical thinking skills to identify, prioritize and address a patient’s needs over the phone. Ambulatory nurses performing telephone triage carefully listen to their patients, ask clarifying and probing questions to ascertain additional information and then respond with a plan for next steps. Ambulatory nursing practice is often guided by the use of protocols that have been collaboratively developed with other disciplines, such as physicians and pharmacists. These protocols address common issues in a standardized manner and enhance the ambulatory nurse’s autonomous practice. With these tools, nurses can initiate timely and necessary care for patients prior to provider evaluation and consultation. For instance, nurses in the Diabetes Care Center participated in developing the Insulin Management Protocol. The nurses facilitate management of clinic

patients, using the protocol, by adjusting their insulin, as needed, based upon their blood glucose levels and plan of care. The nurses see patients independently in the clinic to assess patients' blood glucose management and conduct patient education. In the Obstetrics/Gynecology Clinic, nurses use multiple protocols to manage obstetric patients. They noted a significant increase in patient satisfaction with answering the phone during office hours, moving from the 83rd to the 93rd percentile in the national database, following the implementation of protocols.

A critical role of the ambulatory nurse is care coordination. Nurses in the Obstetrics/Gynecology Clinic coordinate care for their high-risk obstetric patients. By meeting with each of these patients throughout their pregnancy, they develop a special bond with the patient, fostering relationship-based care. They provide the patient with education and are able to facilitate their enrollment in community services, such as the First Breath program to help applicable patients and families quit smoking. Nurses also connect patients with primary and specialty care providers to assure they are getting the best care possible. They enroll patients in our own programs for mothers and collaborate with the patient's insurance company to offer a variety of other services. Advocating for their patients and connecting them with these resources contributes to their health care during pregnancy.

Care coordination is central to the nurses' role in the Enhanced Care Program Clinic. Their patient population includes patients with chronic conditions and often multiple comorbidities, such as heart failure, diabetes, hypertension and chronic obstructive pulmonary disease. These patients are at high risk for hospital admission and readmission. In addition to routine telephone triage, nurses

in the Enhanced Care Program Clinic complete phone calls to their patients within three days of discharge from the hospital. They identify patients' needs and assure they are linked to the necessary resources and follow-up care providers. Collaboration with external sources such as home care nurses and community case managers is an important part of their work. These patients have significant medication and self-care management needs requiring intensive education, support and reinforcement. Enhanced Care Program Clinic nurses conduct independent clinic visits and prioritize having a patient come in to see the provider and/or nurse for same-day treatment, if the need arises. For instance, a nurse may recognize via a phone call that his or her heart failure patient is having some significant fluid overload symptoms and will need treatment that day to manage the issue. The nurse collaborates with the Enhanced Care Program Clinic physician to obtain orders, such as having the patient come in for administration of an intravenous diuretic, monitoring and education, as well as an adjustment to his medication regime. Without this care, the patient's symptoms could progress to the point of needing to visit the Emergency Department or be admitted to the hospital. Patient education is a critical piece of the nurse's role with this population since they have many complex needs, including the need to understand their role in preventing and recognizing acute exacerbations of their disease processes.

At Froedtert Hospital, ambulatory nurses are growing excellence in autonomous professional nursing practice every day. Whether it is through their telephone or in-person encounters, they provide substantial contributions to high-quality patient care, building trusting relationships and improving care outcomes. ■



Infectious Disease Clinic nurses engaged in live telephone triage  
Left to right: **Nanci Rabideau-Fink, RN**, and **Kate Foster, BSN, RN**