SPECIAL ARTICLES

Physician Practice in Nursing Homes

Paul R. Katz, MD, and Jurgis Karuza, PhD

INTRODUCTION

The readers of this journal are undoubtedly familiar with the roles and responsibilities of physicians caring for nursing home residents. Whether through care guidelines promulgated through AMDA, certification requirements for medical directors, or the myriad of state and federal regulations, nursing home physicians clearly have a well-defined framework in which to practice. What strikes us as curious is the fact that many of these guidelines and policies are established and entrenched with little or no evidence base. Sadly, there is little in the way of an empirical literature that describes what physicians actually do in the nursing home and what impact their practices have on patient outcomes. Virtually nonexistent is any study of traditional “workforce” issues surrounding the training, recruitment, retention, and organization of physicians in long-term care settings. The papers and commentaries presented in this series attempt to address this gap by highlighting salient nursing home physician issues that were originally presented during a first-ever Consensus Conference on Physician Practice in Long-Term Care in Rochester, NY, April 2, 2004.

The dissemination of the series is made possible through a grant from Health Resources and Services Administration, coordinated through the Finger Lakes Geriatric Education Center of Upstate New York.

We begin the first article of this series by framing some of the basic nursing home physician workforce issues specifically related to accepted definitions and current knowledge base. Robyn Stone then reviews a range of interdisciplinary workforce issues as well as the system changes necessary to more fully integrate the physician into both medical and social models of care. Vince Mor continues by outlining the quality measures available to gauge the impact of physician care in nursing homes and suggests a variety of new directions vis-à-vis regulatory oversight and quality improvement. Finally, Orna Intrator reviews the methodologic challenges inherent in research directed at expanding our knowledge base of physician practice in nursing homes. Larry Casalino’s editorial challenges current perceptions of nursing home physicians and outlines a series of recommendations to more clearly define the physician’s role and, in the process, improve care.

Commentaries by nationally recognized experts attending the consensus conference in Rochester are offered following each paper to expand upon the discussion and to stimulate further debate.

Admittedly, this series on nursing home physician workforce only begins to frame the critical issues and potential new directions in research, policy, and program development. In the end, recruitment and retention of committed and competent physicians remains among the highest priorities if we are to move forward and optimize quality care in the nursing home.