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From the **C-Suite** » V. William Hunt

Overlooked ingredient

Nurses provide quality, safety expertise on boards

Amid the national healthcare reform debate, it's also important to keep the need to improve the quality of care and patient safety at healthcare organizations in the forefront. Physicians, nurses and clinical staff at hospitals understand this emphasis, but top-level leadership—including the board of directors—is a key to achieving these goals.

For the most part, however, nurse leaders are overlooked for board positions. In fact, according to researcher Larry Prybil at the University of Iowa, nurses account for fewer than 2.3% of board seats nationwide. Yet, with their intimate knowledge of patient safety and quality care, nurse leaders are uniquely positioned to bring exceptional value to an organization. Our experience at Clarian Health provides first-hand evidence of the benefits that having a nurse in a board leadership position offers.

Not-for-profit Clarian Health, Indianapolis, has provided healthcare in Indiana for more than 10 years, treating more than 840,000 people each year. Our board of directors is a diverse group, and includes a judge, physicians, a bishop, an entrepreneur, a lawyer and—in recent years—a nurse.

Angela Barron McBride joined our board of directors in the fall of 2004. A distinguished professor of nursing, her previous experience included a dozen years as dean of Indiana University School of Nursing and a year as scholar-in-residence at the Institute of Medicine. Soon after joining the board, McBride was appointed chairwoman of the board's committee on quality and patient safety. One of McBride's initiatives has been examining how Clarian Health can realize the Institute of Healthcare Improvement's goals for "getting boards on board" in making a public commitment to measurable quality improvement.

The board had already drawn up a quality and safety plan that called for "continuous improvement toward the 90th percentile for all externally measured indicators" and based senior executive compensation in part on quality and safety performance. Under McBride's leadership, an analysis was made of Clarian's strengths and weaknesses, and the plan was strengthened to standardize safety practices and bake in cultural change. Changes were

made in all job descriptions and new employee orientations to add specific language that reflected individual responsibility for quality and safety. Quality and safety became the first item on the board's agenda, ensuring that each board meeting included the issue. Our quality Web site was continuously updated to ensure transparency around improvement efforts.

These modifications made lasting improvements in both patient and employee satisfaction. Current quality measures include computerized physician order entry, special efforts to eliminate infections and falls, re-education for nurses and clinical staff about the administration of high-alert drugs and benchmarking of Clarian outcomes with national ones identified by the Joint Commission, CMS and University HealthSystem Consortium—all of which have saved lives and made treatment at Clarian Health a better experience.

McBride's experience as a nurse made her vital in recognizing the need and then shaping the plan for implementing these changes. It is an asset internally and externally to say we have a nurse on the board. She is an example of Clarian's acknowledgement of the relationship between nursing, quality care and patient safety visible in our recertification as a magnet hospital. Clarian's experience is being echoed at other health systems—in his study, Prybil visited 10 "high-performing" hospitals and found that half either had nurses on the board or were in the recruiting process.

Including a nurse leader on the board is imperative to improving quality and safety measures—a universal way to better serve patients with the care they deserve. At Clarian Health, we strive to be in the forefront of healthcare in Indiana, but we also think we have learned some lessons that would serve health organizations well in any state. Healthcare leaders should look within their communities to find experienced individuals, like McBride, to serve on boards, where they can contribute significantly to improve our nation's healthcare systems. <<



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