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**What is a Hospitalist?** These specialists can do more than oversee medical treatment for patients in a hospital. One hospitalist believes they should be the leaders of inpatient health-care teams.

BY ADAM SINGER, MD



As the specialty grows in visibility and the number of physicians choosing to enter the field swells, I am frequently being asked, "What is a hospitalist?" On the surface the answer may appear simple. For it is simple to say that "hospitalists are acute-care specialists who focus on a patient's hospital care from time of admission to discharge," and leave it at that. But in reality, defining a hospitalist is far from simple, since there are many interpretations floating about. Some of these, I believe, severely hinder the

growth and appreciation of this important medical specialty. Those of us who practice in the hospitalist field must achieve consensus on the definition of our profession and better educate the medical community as to the enormous value we bring to medical care.

Hospitalists are not simply internists without offices or family practice physicians who have chosen to focus all (or a great majority) of their

time in a hospital setting. This is an image with which we are being inappropriately saddled. The time to change the perception and increase the understanding of hospitalists is now, while the specialty is still relatively new and the specialty's history is being written.

I believe that hospitalists are better defined as doctors dedicated to managing the health-care delivery system on behalf of institutional-

ized patients. This is an important distinction. What this true definition says is that the value hospitalists bring to patients is not found solely in their prowess of performing clinical medicine. While it is safe to affirm that best practices do emerge as hospitalists see given medical conditions with recurring frequency (and establish consistency in practice within a given institution), that only begins to paint the picture of hospitalists' true value. Hospitalists' greatest contribution is found in their immediate availability and attention to the hospitalized patient as well as the entire health-care team. It is this role as a true "team leader"

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that places hospitalists in the center of the health-care universe. And it is from that center that the profession will ultimately be defined.

The dozens of ancillary health-care providers who are involved in the day-to-day caseload are in desperate need of leadership. This is a void hospitalists can and must fill. If hospitalists see patients for their medical issues alone, write standard orders, and then call it a day, they become no different than the classic internist who does rounds prior to office duties. Medical professionals need to renew their thinking concerning not only what a hospitalist is, but also the important role hospitalists can play. Hospitalists are appropriate on just about all inpatient cases with or without a “medical condition.”

During a recent leadership retreat of [IPC-The Hospitalist Company](#), a lively discussion took place among 40 or so hospitalists as to the proper way to “sign off” cases once the medical condition was resolved. In that exchange, two issues became clear. The first was that our own doctors were practicing internal medicine without an office. Once the medical issues were resolved, they were looking for the right way to sign off the case. The second was that this was fine with the specialists, as they had no expectation that hospitalists can do more.

What our doctors were not discussing was who was going to manage the home health or durable medical equipment needs of the patient, adjust discharge medications or talk to the family? Who was going to interact with the health plan, discuss and facilitate case management, ensure physical therapy, arrange follow-up, track data for improvement, and so

forth? None of these items have to do directly with the “medical management” of the patient, but I would argue that it is within these support services that hospitalists can have the greatest impact on care.

Even in a case where there are no medical issues, there is still a desperate

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need for someone to manage the overall care for that patient. Hospitalists are in a position to shoulder this responsibility. In this capacity, hospitalists will see an increasing number of referrals from specialists who recognize that they have only to gain from hospitalists' expertise.

Concurrently, medical staffs who today simply tolerate hospitalists will start to embrace the concept and look to us as valuable colleagues. From the effective driving of the delivery system comes the ability to identify compensation for the extra value that hospitalists bring. And the public, which until now is (for the most part) uneducated as to even the existence of hospitalists, will begin to seek out this medical specialty as an important ally who is trying to bring sense, order, and continuity to a highly fragmented delivery system.

What is a hospitalist? I believe that as hospitalists assume their just role and as the proper definition of our profession becomes clear, it is a question that no

longer will need to be asked. ■

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