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Healthy Outlook Blog

Innovative Eldercare Units Help Improve Hospital Outcomes for Older Patients

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By Lynn Langway | Posted May 22 2012

[elderly care](#), [Hospitals](#), [innovation](#)

Hospital care for the elderly can be a challenge. Many patients—especially those 85 or more—may be physically frail or mentally confused when they're admitted, suffering from several chronic conditions and taking multiple medications. Recuperation after treatment for an illness or surgery can be slow.

A B O U T O U R B L O G

Our blog is a collection of thoughts and stories that serve as inspiration for what healthymagination is—a shared commitment to creating better health for more people. It's written by the people behind healthymagination, as well as members of our advisory board and guest contributors from around the web.

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Now that half their adult patients are 65 or older, a growing number of hospitals are trying to speed recovery times and improve outcomes for older patients through innovation. More than 300 institutions have adopted “age-sensitive” approaches to caring for the elderly in recent years, according to Tara Cortes, PhD, Executive Director of the [Hartford](#)

[Institute for Geriatric Nursing](#) at New York University. Their new methods range from Acute Care of the Elderly (ACE) units with senior-friendly design, to geriatric emergency rooms and roving teams of doctors, nurses, and therapists who are trained in geriatrics.

Recent [research](#) suggests that specialized eldercare can make a real difference. An analysis of 11 previous studies, published in the *British Medical Journal*, found that acute geriatric units can boost the daily functioning of patients and increase their likelihood of returning to their own homes after hospitalization, rather than requiring nursing home care.

[Ocean Medical Center](#) in Brick N.J. opened its acute geriatric unit in 2006 to serve a Jersey shore region that attracts many retirees. Everything was designed to help patients regain their strength and get back on their feet—often quite literally. Because many of the oldest patients have poor eyesight and balance, the spacious rooms were equipped with low-glare uplighting and low-shine floors.

To reduce the risk of pressure sores, the flexible beds were furnished with special adjustable mattresses. And because prolonged bed-rest can weaken muscles,



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Getting Older Can Make You Happier!

Wrinkles and gray hair notwithstanding, most people actually get happier as they get older, according to recent research. A study at the university of Warwick backs up earlier research showing that mental and emotional quality of life (QOL) go up after middle age, even as physical QOL goes down.

patients were urged to get up and start walking the halls with a nurse or trained volunteer as soon as possible. In the first year this “out of bed” strategy was tried, reports Assistant Nursing Manager Betty Dowd, patient falls were reduced by 45% and pressure sores by 90%.

The unit’s goals, says Medical Director Benjamin Lessig, a board-certified geriatric specialist, are “promoting mobility, maintaining psychological health, and maximizing independence” among older patients. To cheer those who are depressed, volunteers with therapy dogs may visit; to reduce anxiety, agitated patients are not restrained. Catheters are employed far less than in the general hospital population, permitting patients to go to the bathroom on their own if possible—a boon to dignity and normal functioning.

Family members are encouraged to stay—overnight, if they wish, in bedside recliners—and three times a week, the doctor, primary nurse and pharmacist make “family rounds” to discuss the case.

Multi-disciplinary geriatric teams are a key factor in the unit’s success. One team was quickly able to identify what was causing delirium in a 76-year-old woman who was transferred from the ER not long ago: a dangerous interaction between the antibiotics she was taking for a urinary tract infection and her anti-seizure medicine. The medications were changed, the delirium subsided—and in three days, the patient was able to start physical therapy.

CONNECT THE DOTS

To learn more how hospitals are reducing functional decline, see this report from the U.S. [Agency for Health Care Research and Quality](#). For more information about the growth of [geriatric nursing](#), visit the NICHE (Nurses Improving Care for Health System Elders) website. To see how geriatric emergency rooms operate, visit [the Mt. Sinai Hospital](#) website. And to learn about high-tech devices that can keep patients safer, see our previous blog entry, “[Smart Patient Room Monitors Safety.](#)”

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