LIBERATING SISTERS TO LEAD

- **Run by University College London Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust (UCLH), in partnership with the Clinical Operational Research Unit at University College of London.**

- **Impacting inpatient wards across UCLH's nine sites.**

INTRODUCTION

The role of the ward sister is critical to improving the quality and safety of patient care. They are responsible for managing and leading their ward teams and environments. At University College London Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust (UCLH), corporate and administrative processes have been structured to support ward sisters in this role.

Despite this, these duties can take up a significant proportion of time and energy.

This project aimed to simplify ward sisters' interactions with corporate and administrative functions, making them more efficient and effective.

WHY DID THEY DO THIS PROJECT?

UCLH is one of the largest NHS trusts in the UK and provides acute and specialist services across six hospitals, employing over 8,000 staff. The ward sisters at UCLH are the highest profile staff group for patients, with the most direct influence on quality of care. They play a vital role in the delivery of clinical excellence and positive patient experience.

Focus groups with the ward sisters revealed that they were spending too much time navigating complex corporate processes when interacting with human resources, finance, procurement and estates.

This Shared Purpose project looked to reduce the complexity of corporate processes, releasing time for clinical leadership. It aimed to free up ward sisters so that they can spend 75% of their time directing, influencing and improving patient care, and remaining visible and present on their wards.

The project team investigated whether changes in corporate services could be linked to improvements in patient care. They looked at whether releasing time ward sisters spent navigating corporate services would increase the amount of time available for clinical leadership, and whether this would have a direct impact on patient care.

WHAT DID THEY DO?

A short-term concierge service was established that was used by ward sisters to flag when they required support from a corporate service. The concierge team then liaised with the relevant team to resolve the issue. A database was used to capture every aspect of the work involved in using a corporate service to address a local issue. Details were logged to record every interaction, such as emails, telephone calls and face-to-face appointments. This enabled the project team to take a whole-system view of corporate processes, identifying duplication and complexity.

Between March 2013 and October 2014, the concierge service desk received and resolved 802 issues. Analysis of these issues showed that they could be attributed to one of six areas: corporate overlap, complex processes, customer service, communication, culture and commercial contracts. The next step was to identify and coordinate specific and sustainable improvement interventions for each of these areas.

One of the most time consuming issues uncovered by the concierge service was the authorised signatory form, used to delegate financial authority for expenditure on a range of goods and services. The project team worked with procurement to develop an email template to replace the signed form.

It was also discovered that it was taking ward sisters around 20 hours of administration per new recruit and up to six months to ensure that all new starters had an ID badge, an IT account, a uniform and access to electronic systems. The project team worked with each of these corporate areas to map the relevant processes and streamline them.

WHAT IMPACT DID THEY SEE?

Local data from May 2011 showed that clinical duties occupied less than 40% of ward sisters time; the project goal was to increase this to 75%. Although the major 'time releasing' projects have been delivered, the project is still ensuring that processes are sustainable, therefore data analysis focusing on how sisters' time is now spent is yet to be completed.

The project has helped to highlight the complexity of the role of the ward sisters, and it is anticipated that this learning will help to continue development of corporate services in the future.

One of the areas of significant change has been in relation to the procurement service. The data collected by the project team allowed leaders of the procurement service to gain insight into the perceptions and experience of ward sisters of their service. This has resulted in a customer focused helpdesk being established to provide support and advice, greatly reducing the effort required and time spent in purchasing essential equipment and supplies.

Changes to the authorised signatory form has reduced the time to gain access to the procurement system from an average of three months (in which time the ward sisters would spend a high proportion of time chasing) down to one day, and has resulted in fewer frustrations due to lost forms and wasted time.

The changes to the new starter process has eliminated the use of multiple forms and ensured that each new starter is work ready on day one.

WHAT DID THEY LEARN?

A whole system view
While the project team expected to be able to pinpoint where the specific points were 'broken' in particular services and aim to fix them, this has not been the case in certain areas. Processes were much more complex than first imagined and the project has highlighted the need for a strategic approach to issues, because they cross departmental boundaries.

Embed and spread
The embedding of the learning from the project has been organic. For example, the productive corporate service tool that was planned has now been encompassed into UCLH Future, the trust's strategic transformation programme. However, data and learning from the project has been used to shape this.

Bringing corporate and clinical departments together
The project team used the development of the principles of the concierge services as an opportunity to actively engage clinical and corporate departments. These events were well received and were attended by 99% of the ward sister population and corporate services.

Unexpected challenges
One of the major challenges was encouraging ward sisters to utilise the concierge service and complete activity logs, which are vital to gathering data on how the sisters spend their time. However, it was perceived by some ward sisters as asking them to prove their competence and how they manage their time, despite being anonymous.

Another unexpected challenge was the impact of staff turnover: from the original 52 ward sisters only 10 remain.

WHAT ADVICE WOULD THEY GIVE TO OTHERS?

Maintain data channels
The planned closure of the concierge service in July 2014 meant that the project team no longer had a central point to capture data in order to be able to track improvements over time. It is important to plan for these types of situations.

Maintain momentum
It is vital to be able to 'tell the story' to keep the ball rolling, especially when there are changes in personnel. Focus on engagement of staff at the frontline and senior management within departments, so that all involved are well versed on the project.

Take a whole systems approach
Being able to collect and view data from a whole system perspective is key to pinpointing problems. Activity logs are vital to this.

Keep up to date with organisational initiatives
Ensure that your project is not seen as yet another initiative, by keeping up to date with the strategic agenda, and being ready to adapt your own project accordingly.