



Solving the Dual Roles Dilemma: How to Balance MDS Coordination with Clinical Care

It's a common scenario: A nursing home has a nursing shortage, and a vacation, callout or illness has heightened it. So the MDS nurse is given a shift or two to fill. This may seem like a winning solution, but it can ultimately have a negative impact on everyone.

Here's how to take this dilemma and turn it into an opportunity from the most recent Spoonful of Sugar podcast, which featured guest Leah Klusch, Executive Director of The Alliance Training Center.

Significant Responsibilities – and Then Some

It is important to understand and appreciate the specialized work of the MDS coordinator. As Klusch noted, they are dealing with complicated regulatory requirements, and they have to formulate the MDS into data sets that have a tremendous fiscal and clinical influence. This is a lofty responsibility. When they have to take on the role of a floor nurse as well, said Klusch, it "creates a tremendous amount of frustration and fatigue." She added, "These are serious issues, none of which we can minimize."

Pennywise and Pound Foolish?

Klusch noted that there are times when "we are stuck in a model where the nursing shortage is a crisis. You have licensed nurses working in the MDS with data collection and fiscal responsibilities, but they're still nurses. So it's logical in some operational views to have them spend some time on the floor." However, there are some issues with this seemingly logical solution.

For one, Klusch said, "You're utilizing nurses who haven't been on the floor for some time. They may not know all the processes and technology, and they're not familiar with all the residents. It's very stressful for them to get up

to date and be as efficient as they'd like to be." She added, "People aren't always proficient at switching roles easier, especially when it involves something they haven't done for a while."

Consider the reverse situation, Klusch suggested. "What if the MDS were to leave the building and you put a high-level nurse into that role for two weeks. What would that look like?" It likely would be stressful for the nurse and create some challenges for the facility.

How To Keep Your Platinum Professionals

If you need to use MDS nurses on the floor, Klusch had some suggestions. She recently spoke to some of these professionals, and she said, "They want to talk about dual roles and get some preliminary information and direction on things such as the med pass process." At the same time, instead of just being assigned shifts without discussion, she explained, "They want opportunities to ask questions and be part of decision making." Some may be happy to work overnight or weekend shifts, she said, while that may present a hardship for others.

Make no mistake, Klusch stressed, "The nurses I spoke with stressed that they really want to help." They aren't adverse to working on the floor when necessary, but they want to make sure they have the information and resources they need to do so. At the same time, they want to have input on what shifts they take on. What they don't want, Klusch noted, is additional stress, exhaustion and fatigue.

"MDS nurses are worth their weight in platinum," Klusch said, and it is important to attract good nurses to this role. "Some of our youngest nurses have tremendous

capability to understand information systems and data collection. We just have to customize their vocabulary and knowledge base," she said, adding, "I recommend this role to nurses all the time, and I always need good ones for this position."

Facilities can't afford to contribute to their fatigue and burnout. This doesn't mean not ever asking them to take on a dual role. It just means doing this in a way that maximizes their comfort level and confidence.

The Spoonful of Sugar podcast is an innovative partnership between PharMerica and McKnight's. In each program, co-hosts T. J. Griffin, Vice President of Long Term Care Operations & Chief Pharmacy Officer at PharMerica, and John O'Conner, Vice President, Associate Publisher/Editorial Director of McKnight's, address the latest issues in long term care with leading experts and front line providers, practitioners, and others. Listen to this and all Spoonful of Sugar podcasts here, and join Illuminate to get notice of new monthly episodes on emerging trends, issues and the future of the skilled nursing industry.

