

## **Up, up, and away! Clinical ladders offer opportunities for staff RNs**

It was not too long ago that bedside nurses were rewarded for their exceptional skills and the high-quality care they provided to their patients by progressing in their careers to management positions-which then took their skills away from the bedside. To rectify this, many facilities designed career development opportunities for nurses who wanted to stay at the bedside.

One popular avenue for such advancement is the clinical ladder. These programs reward and honor nurses for their work while keeping them at the bedside, where their skills are so greatly needed.

At Presbyterian Hospital of Dallas, an ANCC Magnet Recognition Program®-designated facility since 2006, the clinical ladder program-known to the Presbyterian staff as the Career Advancement System (CAS)-has been in place since the late 1980s, says **Rosa Belgard, MS, RN**, Magnet coordinator and manager of nursing and patient education at Presbyterian Hospital. CAS has gone through several revisions since its inception, most recently to reflect the 14 Forces of Magnetism.

The Magnet Recognition Program expects applicants to offer clinical advancement opportunities to staff nurses.

Belgard says aspects of the CAS were used in much of the evidence when the facility applied for designation.

### **The policy**

According to Presbyterian Hospital's CAS generic policy<sup>1</sup>, the system permits and encourages individual nurses to:

- Assume responsibility for the work to be done
- Set goals and propose ways to achieve them
- Be accountable for professional performance goal achievement
- Receive recognition and compensation for achievement and expertise

The CAS involves the following four progressive levels of clinical nursing practice, which range from novice to expert, reflecting Benner's Model of Skill Acquisition in Nursing<sup>2</sup>:

- **Level I**-At this level, a nurse has minimal experience and is usually a graduate nurse or intern. Upon completing the state board exams, obtaining the initial RN license, and successfully completing the RN internship program, a nurse advances to the next level.
- **Level II**-This level is the base for RNs. "That's sort of the standard level of practice that's expected of all nurses," Belgard says.
- **Level III**-For advancement to this level, a nurse must consistently perform at a strong level on all clinical nurse performance standards.
- **Level IV**-To reach this level, a nurse must have been at Level III for a minimum of two years and have at least five years of experience in nursing. At this level, a nurse has shown that he or she is a leader and role model in

the clinical setting and has outstanding job performance. The criteria for nurses to advance to Levels III or IV involve receiving a minimum number of points (see p. 5 of the PDF of this issue for a grid of the criteria for advancement).

### **The points system**

Points are earned by completing specific activities, such as the following:

- Becoming nationally certified
- Participating in shared governance
- Coordinating or participating in a research project
- Precepting
- Achieving continuing education
- Presenting an inservice
- Getting published
- Committee participation
- Cross-training to another clinical area
- Receiving certification

Each activity has been assigned specific requirements that must be met before the points are earned, and each activity has a specific point value. "We look at what are the things we want to develop overall in our nursing population, and what are the things that take more time and more 'stretch' for a staff nurse or direct care nurse to learn and do, and that is how we decide which things get the highest points," Belgard says.

To move to Level III, 100 points are needed; to move to Level IV, 155 points are needed. The points are divided into categories, and nurses need a certain ratio of each category to progress: 40% must be clinical, 35% must be educational, and 25% can be in any category. All activity points must be documented, and in order to advance to the next level, a disciplinary-free record from the previous year is required.

### **In the mix: The Forces of Magnetism**

"Because we are a Magnet hospital, we really are [encouraging] more and more people to become nationally certified, so obtaining your initial certification is one of the highest point values in our system," Belgard says. Shared governance at the hospital and unit levels is another high-point area, Belgard adds. "Our shared governance really fosters nurses who are articulate and [are] patient advocates who speak out for what the needs of the patient are." A nurse can earn up to 25 points in this clinical section. Research is another high-point-yielding activity.

"Magnet [designation] has really helped us all bring that to the forefront . . . for being a coordinator of a research project, you can earn up to 20 points, and for participating in data collection, you can earn up to 20 points in a research project," says Belgard.

**Kathy Coleman, RN, BSN, CRRN**, a Level III nurse, has earned some of her points through research. "The CAS has empowered me to be a leader in my field and to

present my findings to further enrich those around me, both professionally as a caregiver, as well as professionally as a colleague," she says.

Nurses participating in the CAS must submit a packet of information annually to show what activities they have completed. "They get to choose those activities in conjunction with their nurse manager and the clinical specialist on those units so that they are activities that are helpful to the unit or helpful to the hospital," Belgard says. She reports that CAS has been a well-received program at Presbyterian Hospital.

"The CAS has been an avenue for me to grow professionally on an annual basis," says **Tanya Schlemmer, MS, MSN, RN-BC, CCRN-CMC, FNP-C**, a Level III nurse. "The CAS has allowed me to be recognized within my profession and amongst my peers for all my ongoing efforts to provide quality healthcare services in the communities I serve."

Nurses are given a monetary incentive for reaching Levels III and IV. At Level III, a nurse receives a bonus of \$2,080, and at Level IV, \$4,160. In addition, unit celebrations are held for pinning ceremonies.

## References

1 Presbyterian Hospital of Dallas, Division of Nursing (2005). Career Advancement System generic policy.

2 Benner, Patricia (2001). *From Novice to Expert: Excellence and Power in Clinical Nursing Practice*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall.

*Source: HCPPro's Advisor to the ANCC Magnet Recognition Program®*, April 2007, HCPPro, Inc.