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39

Part 3

Now, an important concept in the smooth running of any hospital, and one which frequently raises concern in the popular press, is the notion of integrated care pathway, or ICP. So, what do I mean by the integrated care pathway, exactly? Well, to help you understand this concept, can you look for a moment at the patient leaflet that I have just handed out? As you can see, a patient typically arrives in admissions and then passes through several departments, meeting different members of the emergency team, before being discharged at the end of his or her stay. Let's look at an example of this. Say a patient arrives with a suspected fractured hip. After being admitted, the patient may spend time in the waiting room before being seen by the triage nurse who will assess their symptoms and vital signs. They will then be sent for an X-ray, before going to the surgical assessment unit. Just prior to the operation, the anaesthetist will make an assessment of the patient's fitness for operation. Immediately after the operation, the patient will spend time in the recovery room, then go back to the orthopaedic ward. And then, finally, the patient is discharged back to the care of their GP or family doctor. Despite significant advances in technology and increased specialization, the organization of these departments has changed very little. However, looking at it another way, changes in the patient mix and profile – an ageing population, in effect – has brought about certain problems, notably an increase in admissions to acute care hospitals. And that's for both planned and emergency care. The point is that the resulting flow of patients is often inefficient and poorly coordinated. This is a phenomenon that has been noted in small regional hospitals as well as the larger teaching hospitals. In financial terms, hospital wards are under pressure to close or to reduce the number of beds. But why is 'patient flow' so important? Well, with hospitals that are capable of functioning to their optimal capacity, patient waiting times are reduced, the quality of care is improved, and hospitals become more cost-effective – in this way maximizing the benefits of hospital care for all those who need it.

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Answers

 39

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