

## Perspective

# Expanding Roles for Nurses and Nurse Practitioners in Spine Care

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In the era of value-based care and impending bundling of spine care, nurses and nurse practitioners (NPs), are increasingly integral to bridging the gap in providing quality care for spine patients. This gap in care is caused by an increase in the aging population and limited access to specialized care. In this article, we will review the importance and necessity of nurses and NPs in spine practice.

Based on US Census data, the median age of the population will increase over the next 40 years.<sup>1</sup> With this increasing aging population, the incidence of degenerative spinal conditions will also grow<sup>2</sup> and lead to more patients seeking care for their back or neck problems. Not only will we see an increase in numbers of patients, but we'll see an increase in elderly patients specifically. As the population increases, the diagnosis of other medical comorbidities such as hypertension, high cholesterol, heart disease and diabetes will also increase. These diagnoses are treatable, but do add another layer of complexity when treating patients with back and neck pain.

In an effort to expand access to patients, NPs are practicing independently or collaboratively and are able to evaluate the patient at the onset of spine-related symptoms. Sarro, Rampersaud and Lewis reported on an NP-led surgical spine consultation clinic in 2010.<sup>3</sup> The study included 177 pre-selected patients with a diagnosis of disc herniation, spinal stenosis or disc degeneration. The NP assessed the patient and developed a diagnosis based on clinical symptoms and radiographic findings. Together with the patient, a treatment plan was developed. A surgeon in the practice then evaluated the patient. NP and surgeon diagnosis were in agreement 100% and the treatment plan was 95% in agreement. Patient satisfaction for the NP consultation was 97%, and 94% for examination thoroughness. In addition to demonstrating NP effectiveness in diagnosis and treatment of patients suffering from diseases and disorders of the spine, the NP in this particular Canadian study was also able to provide appointments to patients sooner, an average of 12 weeks versus a 31-week wait for other providers.<sup>3</sup>

### Nurse Navigation

The complexity of spine care and treatment options lends itself to a recent concept termed spine navigation. Navigation is applicable as the condition is longer in duration; has variable symptoms and diagnosis, multiple providers and in various locations; or is poorly coordinated.<sup>4</sup> This will be especially helpful with the aging population. Nurses are able to fill the role of spine nurse navigator. Spine conditions have several options for providers as an entry point to care, and a nurse's knowledge with spine conditions and providers will allow the patient to make an informed decision. The navigation process will benefit patient and providers alike; matching the patient with the best provider at the onset will decrease frustrations for both.

Six years ago, the Spine Center at Washington University established an NP position with the intent of capturing the acute/subacute population of spine patients. The typical wait for a new spine patient prior to this time was three months and those willing to wait had experienced pain for years. The center is a collaboration between psychiatry and or-

thopedic spine surgeons. Patients are given an appointment within 48 hours with a physiatrist or NP, if the pain episode is less than three months. Since inception in January 2012, the spine center has seen 3,137 acute and subacute new patients, a population not reached previously.

Nurses and NPs are coming forward to fill these gaps in spine care, which are exacerbated by an aging population and decreased access to this specialized care. Additionally, nurses and NPs are trained with a significant emphasis on the incorporation of the physical, emotional and social well-being of the patient, which may be an advantage when patients first seek care for a spine problem. The process, commonly referred to as nurse navigation, enables nurses to evaluate the patient and direct him or her to the best spine provider, meeting the demand for access to spine care.

## References

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