



## Nurses on Healthcare Boards

*A smart and logical move to make.*

As the spotlight on healthcare reform continues, it is becoming clear that hospitals need to focus on improving value by optimizing the balance among healthcare cost, quality and accessibility for patients and other stakeholders. In moving toward a more value-driven basis for healthcare delivery, hospital boards and leaders will benefit from tapping resources with clinical care expertise and an understanding of patient and community needs. Add to that skills in communications, decision making, management and leadership, and you have the basic job description of many of today's nurse executives.

Research on nonprofit hospital governing boards indicates that only about 2 percent of their members are nurses. In this column we examine why hospital boards should take a closer look at nurses—a governance resource that remains largely untapped by most boards.

The value nurses can bring to the board table has been acknowledged and supported by many healthcare leaders. Donald M. Berwick, MD, president and CEO of the Institute for Healthcare Improvement, noted in the April 2005 issue of *BoardRoom Press*, "It is key that nurses be as involved as physicians, and I think

boards should understand that the performance of the organization depends as much on the well-being, engagement, and capabilities of nursing and nursing leaders as it does on physicians. I would encourage much closer relationship between nursing and the board."

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In 2007, the Center for Healthcare Governance's Blue Ribbon Panel on Health Care Governance recommended that boards "include physicians, nurses and other clinicians on the board. Their clinical competence and viewpoints are valuable to other board members and will help the board better understand the needs and concerns of several of the organization's stakeholders."

And a 2009 Grant Thornton LLP study of governance in community health systems urged that "All boards

should consider enriching their membership with greater racial and gender diversity; they also should consider the appointment of highly respected and experienced nursing leaders as voting members of the board to complement physician members and strengthen clinical input in board deliberations." The study also said, "Engaging leaders in the nursing profession on hospital and health system boards has not yet become the norm, nor has it been accepted as a benchmark of good governance. However, given the importance of nursing in the provision of patient care, it seems likely that the idea of engaging nurses on boards and board committees will receive growing consideration in the future."

### Exploring Nurse Executive Skills

Nurses are the largest group of healthcare professionals and the fastest growing group of primary care professionals in the United States, according to the National Nursing Centers Consortium. As boards consider governance effectiveness under healthcare reform, the skills and attributes that nurses can bring to the board table are worth closer examination.

Because nurses have the most contact with patients, families and

physicians, nurses have in-depth knowledge of healthcare delivery that could prove valuable to a board of trustees on relevant issues. Nurse leaders also possess additional attributes that make them a key asset for healthcare organization governing boards. These include having:

- Credibility with policy-makers, employees, health plan administrators, physicians and executives.
- The ability to identify and triage problems.
- An understanding of issues concerning hospital staff and

effective approaches to employee retention.

- Awareness of community health needs.

Despite these positive qualities, nurses are not solidly among the ranks of today's healthcare governing board members, and this practice needs to be re-examined in light of current realities in healthcare, according to Lawrence D. Prybil, PhD, FACHE, governance researcher and professor at the Department of Health Management and Policy at the University of Iowa. Potential conflicts of interest issues may arise during the selection process of a nurse to the board, but questions can easily be resolved, he says. For example, as they sometimes do with physician board candidates, hospital boards can consider nurses who hold leadership positions at organizations outside of the hospital's service area. Or, if a nurse trustee is a member of the board of a hospital where he or she is also employed, the board should ensure that any conflicts are disclosed and handled in accordance with the board's conflict of interest policy and process.

Removing obstacles to nurse participation on boards and embracing what nurses can bring to governance are good first steps. The number of nurses on boards also is likely to increase when nurses themselves focus on the advantages of serving on boards and better understand what it takes to be an effective trustee.

"Board service brings with it both valuable benefits and awesome responsibility," says Connie Curran, RN, EdD, CEO of Best On Board, an organization that provides

integrated governance education, testing and certification services for current and potential healthcare organization board members and leaders. “As healthcare boards seek to expand the diversity of their membership, they will view nurses as a ready resource to draw on as they become more aware of what nurses can bring to the board table *and* as nurses take the initiative and prepare themselves to become trustees.”

Curran suggests a number of actions healthcare boards and CEOs can take to increase nurse participation on boards. These include:

- Seeking nurse leaders from within and outside of their organizations to serve on the board.

Schools of nursing and other community organizations, such as the American Cancer Society, American Heart Association or Visiting Nurses Association, are good resources to tap.

- Supporting and encouraging nurse leaders within their organizations to prepare for board service by educating themselves on healthcare governance issues and board roles and responsibilities.
- Working with organizations, such as the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, that have developed initiatives to help nurses become hospital board members.

As healthcare organizations and their boards grapple with how to address issues of cost, quality and access under healthcare reform, they should embrace the stakeholder perspective, clinical expertise and other contributions nurse trustees can bring to governance. ▲

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