University Health System (UHS), a nationally recognized academic medical center and partner of The University of Texas Health Science Center San Antonio, is consistently acknowledged as an innovator for advancing treatment options, new technologies and clinical research. It’s been named as one of the nation’s Most Wired Hospitals & Health Systems and as one of the Top 25 Most Connected Healthcare Facilities. It’s also been recently designated as a Magnet® healthcare organization by the American Nursing Credentialing Center (ANCC).

The accolades, however, weren’t always so numerous, and the Magnet journey wasn’t an easy one.

According to Nancy Ray, associate administrator and Chief Nursing Officer at University Health System, the organization was struggling to create a patient- and family-centered culture for quite some time. Ray, who joined UHS in 1989 and began her current role in 1994, was impressed by the ANCC’s roadmap to bring quality to an organization and to create a structure focused on the patient and the family. UHS embarked on its Magnet journey in 2004.

Prior to committing, however, UHS had only a few initiatives in place to engender patient-centered care, including its shared governance model. The model gave the hospital the components it needed and made it a good candidate for ANCC’s Magnet process, Ray said. “But, because we didn’t have much staff nurse participation in shared governance, we began to search for nurses to become Magnet champions.” Magnet champions, according to Carlos Castañeda, director of patient relations at UHS, are the hands-on individuals at the bedside, who experience the day-to-day interactions with patients. “These are the individuals who examine each particular unit and see what they can do to improve the patient experience,” he said.

UHS also began to educate its directors on the professionalism and quality of nursing. “Our directors bought into the fact that the beauty of nursing happens at the bedside,” said Ray. “This engagement helped them to share power with our bedside nurses, patient care coordinators and Magnet champions. We knew that in order to be magnetic, we’d need to have transformational leaders at every level of the organization who were willing to bypass the hierarchical tradition of nursing.”

According to Ray, the long term goal was for each director to be in charge of a subgroup of the patient experience and to support the Magnet champions, who were expected to improve patient satisfaction at the bedside. This goal was at first lofty, because before it set out on the journey, UHS lacked a standard way to measure patient satisfaction and patient experience.

In January 2006, the organization sought out and partnered with National Research Corporation to ensure UHS was able to consistently measure and improve the patient experience. The Magnet champions, who were either recruited by their director or who had volunteered, were then assigned with the task of learning about the National Research patient experience measurement and improvement program. “They needed to know where our information came from, how we obtained our reports and what the numbers meant,” said Castañeda.

For a short time, the leadership team experienced resistance from the nursing staff regarding the credibility of the National Research survey. “Some nursing staff members believed that only patients who had a poor experience would respond to a survey. However, once they started to read the comments, they realized that most patients were satisfied with the care they received, except for one issue, like an instance of poor judgment or lack of communication on the nurse’s part,” said Ray. “After they determined that this was throwing off the scores, they knew they had to delight each and every patient by delivering true patient-centered care.”

With the transformational leadership and Magnet champion structure in place, UHS began documenting its exemplary practice improvements and innovative patient-centered care solutions. It

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received a handbook from the ANCC – which provides information to all embarking on the journey with details of how to become a successful Magnet organization. The handbook includes certain structural, professional and quality processes to consider. It also lists the various outcomes that need to be documented and then demonstrated to the ANCC appraisers.

Evelyn Swenson-Britt, research director and Magnet project coordinator at UHS, played a pivotal role in gathering the data and developing the stories that would demonstrate how UHS exemplified the Forces of Magnetism. According to Britt, gathering and refining the documentation was no small feat. “You send in written documentation that, when combined, cannot be more than 18 inches tall. It’s a huge, concrete process,” she said. “We finally submitted our application in November 2007.”

Leadership tailored the Magnet processes to fit UHS, but remained focused on the outcomes.

UHS first realized it needed to enhance its nurse-to-nurse and nurse-to-physician communication. “We knew we were doing well tracking patient complaints, reporting them to the board or clinical management team and then developing resolutions, but we were not tracking our internal complaints in an acceptable fashion,” said Castañeda.

In response, the leadership team developed a peer-to-peer evaluation process. “It helped our nurses communicate with each other and provide honest feedback,” said Britt.

Leadership also implemented a nursing ethics council, which is designed to measure nurses’ moral distress levels, as well as the ethical climate of the entire organization. “We also hosted leadership training conferences for directors and patient care coordinators and put more than 120 nurses through two-day workshops,” said Britt. “We were focused on creating engagement, which is all about staff nurses believing they can make changes and are expected to do so.”

With the peer evaluation process, nursing ethics council and training workshops elevated the professional culture for employees; it also advanced outcomes and the level of care for patients. These improved outcomes, according to Ray, were essential because, “the documentation isn’t everything.” When the ANCC visits an organization, it ensures that nurses put their professionalism and their continued education into practice. “They verify that the evidence alluded to in the documentation are actions being carried out at the bedside,” said Ray.

In terms of improved outcomes, one exemplar included in the documentation was UHS’ pain management group. “We have a dedicated group of nurses that is constantly working to improve pain management for patients,” said Britt. “For example, we play music in the catherization lab to reduce patient anxiety and their need for pain medications during procedures.”

UHS also implemented National Research Yacker Tracker sound meter. “We knew that the quietness of the environment would help patients rest, get healthier and reduce their time at the hospital,” said Castañeda. “We didn’t realize that the subdued ambiance would then help staff concentrate and provide an even higher level of care.”

Additionally, UHS employed hourly patient rounding and has seen improvements in its overall patient satisfaction scores. “Research showed that hourly rounding would improve communication, foster patient safety, etc.,” said Castañeda. “We’ve correlated hourly rounding to each unit’s quality data and have seen a drop in patient falls. It’s incredible. “From the onset of its journey, UHS was determined to keep staff up-to-date on the Magnet process and provided regular updates. “Our communication primarily targeted staff members because we wanted to help them understand what the Magnet journey was all about and why their involvement was so important,” said Leni Kirkman, executive director of corporate communications and marketing.

Before the initial kick-off event, the communications department tailored a Magnet logo and slogan specific to UHS. By capitalizing on the famous San Antonio theme, “Remember the Alamo,” UHS created top-of-mind awareness, boosted staff morale and generated staff buy-in with the nostalgic slogan, “Remember the Mission.” The department then worked with a group of staff nurses to create a nursing blog on the hospital’s internal website that was maintained to frequently present resources and evidence-based tools to help nurses engage with one another and with the Magnet journey.

The communications department also ensured that the monthly employee newsletter included new developments regarding the Magnet journey. “We termed it our ‘Magnet corner’ and highlighted the various Magnet initiatives, whether it was a newly-created research poster, a published journal article, award won or photo taken from a Magnet journey event,” said Kirkman.

The communications department also helped develop a nursing annual report – written for and by nurses – that is now in its third year.
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UHS also communicated its Magnet journey with patients and families. In addition to extensive facility signage, UHS successfully involved and educated its community members – especially during Nurse’s Week. “We held an event where non-clinical members of our organization, as well as community leaders like the fire and police chiefs, dressed in nursing scrubs and shadowed nursing and support staff for several hours,” said Kirkman. “At the end of the observations, they gathered together to share their experiences with patients, families, staff and other community members.”

The event, which UHS calls “Walk in my Shoes,” boosted awareness of the day-to-day responsibilities that nurses face, and reiterated the importance of patient-centered care and nursing excellence. It was so successful that it is now held annually.

UHS leadership also understood the importance of keeping Magnet champions and other staff motivated and constantly took time to obtain feedback and recognize high performers. “It’s the little things that tell the staff, ‘we trust you’, ‘we believe in your professionalism’, and ‘we respect your opinion and want you to share it with us,’” said Ray.

To help staff members feel appreciated, the Magnet steering committee hosted a series of breakfast celebrations and presentations led by senior executives. “The breakfasts were a great avenue for the Magnet champions to share stories, encourage one another and learn about bringing different initiatives to life,” said Britt. “It was really an exciting time because staff would hear about an idea, and then tailor it to fit their unit and make it even better.”

UHS regularly developed fun and exciting ways to engage and motivate staff throughout the six-year journey. Annual nursing retreats helped keep the journey top-of-mind, along with several giveaways, including polo shirts and magnets, handbooks and posters that outlined the Forces of Magnetism.

Nurse rounding was also essential to motivate and engage staff members. “During our ‘trip-or-treat’ program, we regularly visited nurses, offered healthy snacks and distributed information about getting involved in nursing research,” said Kirkman.

UHS also boosted staff morale with a number of internal nursing competitions. For example, communications challenged nurses to develop a poster that increased nursing awareness of ways to reduce pressure ulcers. “The contest sparked a lot of nurse creativity, especially because of the nature of the topic. Nurses had to ensure that they were evaluating patients’ pressure ulcers and turning their patients when necessary, and this contest did just that,” Kirkman said.

These extra efforts to boost staff morale and ensure staff buy-in have paid off handsomely. “Prior to embarking on the Magnet journey, UHS turnover topped 22 percent. We currently sit at about 10 percent staff turnover and I’m not filling any positions,” said Ray.

According to the ANCC, Magnet hospitals are unique in their magnetism – their ability to recruit and retain excellent nurses. Therefore, system-wide recruitment and retention campaigns have been put in place to keep the best at UHS. “The interview process is now completely behavioral-based. We also ensure that the interview panel includes not only the hiring manager, but individuals from the staff units as well. This has also improved staff empowerment at all levels,” Ray said.

In another nice touch, whenever UHS brings a new staff member on board, the new employee receives a welcoming letter from the CEO. Directors offer a warm reception, too. “Directors present their newly acquired staff members with a pen and pencil set to let them know they’re glad to have them as part of the team,” said Castañeda. After 45 days of employment, the director takes the new employee out to lunch to assess their cohesiveness with the organization. “We want to open the lines of communication immediately and tackle any feelings of discomfort that may arise,” said Castañeda.

Despite diligent efforts to engage staff and generate enthusiasm for the Magnet journey, it is difficult to maintain 100 percent staff buy-in, Castaneda said. “We’re always going to have some staff members who are excited about the journey, but may not want to be involved in committees, working on research or furthering their education,” said Castañeda.

To combat any behaviors of hostility, UHS structured its merit system to reward those who go above and beyond. “There’s a salary-based incentive for staff who want to improve, and by joining a research team or by participating in a quality or process improvement initiative, they are able to succeed and are rewarded for their efforts,” said Castañeda.

UHS staff members are stepping-up their game to ensure that the hospital achieves Magnet re-designation, an accomplishment that only 2.2 percent of the nation’s hospitals attain. By striving to advance its research program, generate new innovations and share its best practices with members of the healthcare community, UHS is proving its dedication to improving the quality of the patient experience. "We really are committed to developing..."
our staff members. We want them to become bedside clinical scientists and produce the kind of new knowledge that fosters patient-centered care,” said Britt.

Ray agreed, stating that UHS is focused on teaching its nurses to be more knowledgeable and to exhibit increased sensitivity. “We are accomplishing this task through nurse rounding and by offering opportunities for personal and professional growth,” she said. UHS obviously has a defined budget to work within, but it does its best to allow for the professional development of its nurses, by doing such things as covering the cost of tuition reimbursement, said Ray. “In addition, each nurse has $200 that they may allocate to advance their education each year – which includes completing various certifications and attending conferences,” she said. “More importantly, we are flexible with scheduling and pay for nurses’ time to attend such outings.”

Leadership also disseminates its National Research survey comments throughout its system and uses its data as touch points to keep the patient experience relevant. “Our journey, our scores and our outcomes, have become a topic of discussion every single day,” said Ray. “We constantly talk about quality, patient care, electronic medical records, even scheduling, as it relates to the patient experience and nursing excellence. We don’t necessarily use the term ‘Magnet,’ but, all staff meetings relate to the journey and the wonderful outcomes that result from it.”

The communications department is even tapping into the knowledge of its staff members to advance the dissemination of its Magnet-related messages and to engage staff with real-time updates. For example, the department works closely with the Magnet champions to develop podcasts and deliver them via social media channels. “We’re really taking advantage of these technological tools,” said Kirkman, “which is helping to push our message to a whole new level.”

Consistent with most healthcare organizations, UHS is engaged in more than one improvement initiative. On top of the Magnet journey, UHS initiated its master facility multi-year capital improvement program, “Target 2012.” The campaign is designed to expand the UHS facilities to become more patient-centered and better serve its patients and community. The expansion includes a new tower that will double the organization’s bed size.

“Every process that goes into the planning of the facility must answer the question of, ‘Is this patient-centered?’” said Ray. “We’re responding by ensuring patient confidentiality and safety with private rooms and a relaxed environment.”

To further meet the patient-centered expectation, nursing staff members have been involved at each step of the expansion process and are represented on various campaign committees. “Nurses communicate their Magnet journey experiences, provide their thoughts as to how the new facilities should be set up and help with design and process enhancements,” said Kirkman.

Expansion or not, it’s important for nurses to consider that one part of improving patient care is to understand the complete experience through the eyes of the patient, said Ray. “We do a great job putting ourselves into the patient’s shoes regarding how our care delivery relates to their disease process,” she said, “but we need to do a better job appreciating what hospitalization does to a human being.”

Of course, extensive improvement doesn’t happen overnight, and despite challenges along the way, UHS is determined to keep on its journey. “Meeting the requirements alone is an extensive process, so it’s important to engage staff members across all levels of the organization and to be patient,” Ray said. “The reward is so great.” Kirkman agreed, stating that involvement at all levels is essential because, while the Magnet journey is about the recognition of excellent nursing care, it is very much dependent upon the support that the entire organization provides to patients. “The more people that you can get involved in their areas of expertise, the more it helps to lighten everyone’s load,” Kirkman said. Brit reiterated that the Magnet journey is focused on the value of care that is delivered to patients. “It’s high-quality and cost-effective care. Not all [hospitals] are perfect, but we’re in an improvement mode – striving to be the best.”

Embracing the Magnet journey is simply the right thing to do, Castañeda said. “We want to deliver patient-centered care,” Castañeda said. “That’s why we’re striving for nursing excellence and we always will be. The journey never ends.”

For more information on University Health System’s journey to Magnet status, visit www.UniversityHealthSystem.com.