

A Manager's Perspective

Irrelevance is NOT Sustainable

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Since this is my last column of the 1900's, I have been thinking about it for quite some time now. I wanted this column to be longer lasting, more insightful and more meaningful as we start the New Year. I have asked many colleagues and pundits for topic ideas. Many of them have been quite helpful. I have asked them two very specific questions:

1. What do you think has been the most significant event for physical rehab in the 1900's?
2. What single piece of advice or wisdom would you give to a rehab manager as they develop career plans for the future?

The responses have been much less controversial (and interesting) for the first question than for the second. Although there will never be full consensus on such a question, there has been a plurality of opinion.

The most significant event for physical rehab in the 1900's

The most significant event for physical rehab in the 1900's was the inclusion of significant rehabilitation benefits in the Medicare program at its inception. Medicare inclusion clearly legitimized what was at that time a fledgling industry. As we have all come to see, Medicare is often the leader in setting policy for other types of health care service. In this case, Medicare coverage of rehab services opened the door to rehab services in many other arenas.

Other events that were frequently mentioned included the following:

1. Development and expansion of the entrepreneurial rehab practice
2. Development of managed care systems
3. Development of community-wide integrated health care delivery systems

4. Publication of The Guide to Physical Therapist Practice and the movement toward evidence based practice

All of these were/are very important to the further development of rehab services however; none of them would matter if our services and value were not recognized in the original Medicare legislation in the early 1960's.

Take this advice and call me in the morning

There were a wide variety of topics that were included in response to the question on advice for rehab managers as they develop career plans for the future. Among these were:

1. Become more active in the legislative and health policy arena.
2. Develop strong managerial skills in a wide variety of settings and situations.
3. Get and stay politically active
4. Develop strong clinical skills, then develop managerial skills, then develop leadership skills.

In my opinion – and you are all free and welcome to disagree – the best advice for the future is:

?? *Create systems and services that matter within your environment. Communicate regularly how and why your services matter. Constantly remember that irrelevance is simply not sustainable.*

There are several excellent threads of advice in this statement. Most of them deal with the issues of value and influence. Clearly, there is a strong imperative to produce services that are valued by all the relevant customers – both within and outside

our organizations. We need to understand the difference between the need for our services and the demands for them. Many of us have begun to understand this difference as we have seen the demand for our services reduced by implementation of the Balanced Budget Act of 1997 while the needs for these same services has been steady or even increased! It certainly has been a painful lesson for many.

Irrelevance is not sustainable. If we don't matter, eventually someone will realize that and regardless of how wonderful we think we are, our services will not be considered necessary – only nice. Nice is often a luxury. Irrelevance is not sustainable. If we don't matter, we are irrelevant. If we can't show and prove how we matter, some will consider us irrelevant. Irrelevance is not sustainable.

An additional corollary is the implication that we must, as rehab services leaders and managers, produce systems and services that are no longer “not bad” but rather which are excellent. It is incumbent upon us to shift from the mentality of “not getting caught” to one of striving for true excellence. This can be easy to forget in our current environment of OIG witch-hunts and fraud finding. However, in order to matter, we must rise above the lowest common denominator mentality of fraud and abuse inquisitions and seek interventions (both clinical and managerial) that are effective, affordable and sustainable.

One last piece of advice that I heard repeatedly – we must all pull together or it will drive us apart. Together we really can make a difference.

Happy New Year and all the best to you.

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