Show Me the Evidence - Improving Alcohol Withdrawal Outcomes in Acute Care
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Problem: A lack of standardized inpatient screening and care for alcohol withdrawal (AW) caused numerous adverse events. Patients were not identified until severe symptoms arose.

Evidence: Delayed diagnosis and treatment of AW results in adverse outcomes. Screening tools to identify at risk drinking and symptom-triggered dosing protocols have been shown to improve care.

Strategy: Implement a care management guideline (CMG) to improve identification and management of patients at risk for AW/DT.

Practice Change: The existing Clinical Practice Guideline, used only by nursing, was changed to a CMG to be used by all disciplines. The CMG includes valid and reliable tools for screening, assessment and symptom documentation, two algorithms - “Precaution” (observation) and “Treatment”, and a physician order set.

Evaluation: The primary outcome measures are AW/DT related restraint use, Rapid Response Team calls (RRT), and transfers to the ICU. Data are gathered for patients with primary and secondary diagnoses of AW/DT.

Results: Data for one quarter following implementation of the protocol revealed interesting trends. The percentage of patients restrained with all but a secondary diagnosis of AW decreased. The percentage of patients with RRT calls decreased for patients with primary and secondary diagnosis of DT and increased for patients with secondary diagnosis of AW. Our interpretation is that nurses recognized the need for an RRT earlier. The number of patients transferred to ICU decreased for patients with a primary diagnosis of DT.


Lessons Learned: Early intervention, appropriate dosing, and frequent reevaluation are key to managing symptoms. Assessment tools were confusing. AW/DT patients are high acuity and require staffing considerations. Nurses and physicians were not comfortable with benzodiazepine dosing. Few experts were available to assist staff. Despite these initial issues adaption of the CMG has reduced adverse advents.

Bibliography