



Building a Culture of Resource Stewardship at Bluewater Health

The University of Alberta and the CSMLS have been collaborating on a project called Lab Wisely to explore medical laboratory professional (MLP) involvement in initiatives to improve the utilization of health care resources. Our activities to date include the formation of an expert panel to develop recommendations and a national survey, select statistics from which you will find in our new article series.

This article is the first in a Lab Wisely series that highlights laboratory utilization projects across Canada. In this article, we outline our conversation with Debbie Croteau, medical laboratory technologist (MLT) and Director of Diagnostic Services at Bluewater Health in Sarnia, Ontario, to learn about the success of Choosing Wisely initiatives at Bluewater Health.

HOW IT ALL STARTED

In 2015, Debbie Croteau and a small group of colleagues from Bluewater Health took a leadership course through the World Health Innovation Network. They were challenged to find a project for the course, so the group chose to focus on Choosing Wisely Canada. They wondered how it could be put into effect at their institution, and this led to the development of the Choosing Wisely Committee at their 300-bed hospital in Sarnia, Ontario. Four years later, they now have an expanded, engaged and diverse committee, along with a list of successful initiatives that have improved the appropriateness of care in their institution.

It is well known that some laboratory tests are prone to inappropriate use, and many institutions are trying to tackle overtesting — an issue that became Debbie's focus. Debbie and her colleagues drew inspiration from Toronto's North York General Hospital, which addressed high-volume testing and found success after they focused on reducing requests for ten specific tests. At Bluewater Health, they decided to focus on their "Top 7" lab tests, targeted for improved utilization: blood urea nitrogen (BUN), aspartate aminotransferase (AST), thyroid stimulating hormone (TSH), erythrocyte sedimentation rate (ESR), serum folate, creatine kinase (CK) and urine cultures. Many of these low-value lab tests existed on prearranged test bundles that were automatically ordered together.

WHAT HAPPENED

The committee approached the issue by first providing physicians with evidence about test misutilization before shifting to more specific Bluewater Health objectives. Then, they made a clear request: Would

the physicians consider removing the "hard check" (the automatic ordering option) for these tests on their order sets? By priming the doctors with evidence about the potential for overuse, physicians were more open to reconsidering their practices. As a result, the "Top 7" tests were unbundled from many order sets, and testing dropped dramatically. Serum folate testing alone dropped by about 94 percent, and BUN testing dropped by 74 percent. Credit for the success, says Debbie, goes to Choosing Wisely Canada for making high-quality, credible evidence readily available for distribution.

PHYSICIAN ENGAGEMENT

Though a team approach to address overtesting is important, gaining physician buy-in and participation is critical due to their influence and role in test ordering. In addition to filling physician committee positions, such as committee chair, something that the staff at Bluewater Health focused on was providing venues for physician peer-to-peer interaction. Debbie described a time when the committee presented Choosing Wisely recommendations about blood transfusion to surgeons and anesthesiologists. They noticed that by allowing open discussion time, the physicians began to compare practices while sifting through the evidence, helping one another understand how to implement the new recommendations. A year later, ordering single units of blood, as opposed to habitually ordering multiple units, had become second nature.

The physicians have also been engaged in other ways. They are encouraged to create "tips of the month" that are circulated broadly, and they deliver presentations about improving resource utilization to other health care professionals, such as physiotherapists and

chiropractors. By putting Choosing Wisely on as many agendas as possible, it is becoming part of the culture of the organization.

VALUE FOR MONEY

Much like creating a brand, making key messages clear can be helpful when you are trying to get buy-in. The message that Bluewater Health's Choosing Wisely Committee wanted to convey was that it wasn't just about saving money. It was about improving care and doing "what was best for the patient," as Debbie states. While a full cost analysis wasn't performed, approximately \$50,000 per year was saved just on laboratory testing by modifying the order sets. This also provided an opportunity — the savings were put towards higher-value tests that physicians requested, such as brain natriuretic peptide (BNP). The opportunity to tell stories like this went a long way in gaining vital support from upper administration.

THOUGHTFUL COMMITTEE COMPOSITION

Another component of success was the effort to expand beyond the four founding members of the Choosing Wisely Committee. They sought to diversify in order to bring in new perspectives. In addition to a variety of health professionals, the committee now has business directors, communications specialists and a patient experience advocate. Subject matter experts are often included for short stints on specialized projects, such as the Charge MLT for blood banks when the committee addressed transfusion recommendations. The committee also includes many physicians for short-term efforts. By encouraging brief but intense participation times, the committee can gain insight from relevant voices as well as capitalize on energy and momentum before it wanes.

According to our national Lab Wisely survey,

ONLY

9.6%

of MLPs reported that they had an opportunity to participate in a task force or committee.

34.3%

reported having conversations about improving resource utilization with other health care providers.

61% of MLPs feel a sense of accountability to help improve the appropriateness of laboratory utilization.

71.6% feel that MLPs have an important role to play.

ADVICE FOR MLTs AND MLAs

Debbie acknowledges that she is often the sole representative of the lab on the Choosing Wisely Committee. Shiftwork can make it difficult to attend regular meetings, so ensuring the lab has a voice requires intention. While in the lab, team huddles to discuss utilization initiatives are vital, as MLTs and medical laboratory assistants (MLAs) can offer insight and feedback into ordering and testing patterns.

Being aware of local initiatives may reveal opportunities for lab professionals to support work that is already going on. Data collection and analysis is always important to ongoing efforts, and falls within the skill sets of many lab professionals. At Bluewater Health, the contribution of one of the MLAs who initially helped with collecting data on transfusion practices was so valuable that the activity is now a protected part of her job. For one half-day every month, she compiles and analyzes data to support the sustainability of the utilization initiatives. Debbie also stresses that it's important to be aware of broader campaigns and recommendations, as well as the evidence supporting best practices in utilization guidelines. By having this knowledge, MLTs and MLAs are better prepared to raise questions about the ordering practices that they are observing.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Much can be learned from the Choosing Wisely story at Bluewater Health. Factors contributing to their success include sharing available evidence in thoughtful and diverse ways, engaging physicians, focusing on meaningful outcomes beyond cost savings, being intentional and proactive about committee membership and harnessing existing strengths of the health care team.

Laboratory professionals can and do have a role to play in realizing the more efficient use of health care resources, particularly if they express interest and secure the lab's role in implementing solutions inspired by Choosing Wisely. Does your institution have a Choosing Wisely Committee? Do you have a venue to talk about laboratory test utilization issues? Ask around and see — you might become instrumental in building a culture of laboratory resource stewardship where you work! 📌



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