

COMMENTARY & ANALYSIS

Gormley's Take: Nurses as an Emerging Source of Innovation

Opportunity to tap real-world expertise on what works in health care

By Brian Gormley

Nurses could be the next source of innovation in digital health.

Nurses routinely devise inventive solutions to problems, but medical organizations haven't capitalized on their full potential as innovators, according to a report by accounting, tax, auditing and advisory firm BDO USA LLP and the University of Pennsylvania School of Nursing. Thirty-one percent of medical organizations that were surveyed said they have a nursing leader whose primary responsibility is innovation.

Nurses see patients at the bedside and in the community and have unique perspectives that investors and entrepreneurs could tap into, said Patrick Pilch, managing director and national leader of the BDO Center for Healthcare Excellence & Innovation.

Investors could team up with academic nursing programs to take data about what works and what doesn't in medical care and marry that with other insights, such as genomics information. A startup applying analytics to that repository could develop predictions about how best to manage patients with specific profiles, he said.

"There's an opportunity for venture firms to invest in this space, where nurses are at the forefront of innovation," Mr. Pilch said.

Venture firms have succeeded when backing nurse innovators in the past. In 2012, Kathryn H. Bowles, a former critical-care nurse and now a Penn professor of nursing, co-founded RightCare Solutions Inc., a provider of software used by hospitals to plan patient discharges and manage readmissions.

RightCare raised capital from Domain Associates and others before being acquired by naviHealth Inc. in 2015.

Penn Nursing seeks to encourage more entrepreneurship through a new competitive program in which applicants will be able to win funding and support to develop solutions to specific problems. The effort that could lead to formation of new companies, said Therese S. Richmond, the Andrea B. Laporte professor of nursing and associate dean for research and innovation at Penn Nursing.

Nurses are well-positioned to identify these problems and potential remedies, Dr. Richmond said, adding, "Every product and every process that touches a patient, goes through a nurse."