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Author

Hutchison, Chad, BSN, RN

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Nuts and Bolts for Organizing a Professional Conference

By Chad Hutchison, RN, BSN

In 2005, staff nurses on the 8th floor came to their manager with a request for learning opportunities focused on orthopaedics. Those nurses formed a committee which planned and organized the first Bonafide Orthopaedic Nursing Education Symposium (BONES). Through dedication and effort this symposium is now in its 8th year. Attendance increased to 225 in 2011 and includes multiple disciplines, many UCSD staff, orthopaedic nurses from across the Southern California region and across the country. In 2009, the work of the committee earned the Advance for Nurses “Best Nursing Team” award. Here are our tips, tricks and lessons learned.

1. Teamwork! – To have a successful conference you must have a high-performing team. Ours is comprised of members from orthopaedic units at Hillcrest and Thornton Hospitals. As front-line staff they have a clear idea of trends in care and where training is needed. A core group of 12 committee members meet one to two times per month for one hour per meeting. Many hands make light work, so all tasks are divided evenly, and expectations of the team members are clear. Tasks include contacting speakers, confirming vendors, advertisement, venue decisions, etc.... In addition to the meetings, each member finds an hour or two per month to complete assigned tasks.

2. FUN! – We strive to keep the day full of energy and excitement. Our event is the last Friday in October (National Orthopaedic Nurse’s Day), so the committee dresses up in matching costumes. Last year we were witches,

a previous year we wore 50’s costumes to coincide with the theme of “Shake, Rattle, and Role.” We gather donations of gift cards to raffle throughout the day. Letting people know that after the break we’re giving away a Nordstrom’s gift card really helps get them back in the room! Our retirees contribute a large gift basket and we sell raffle tickets to help offset costs. Last year we raffled off an iPad and nearly doubled our money!

3. Plan Early – Just as soon as we wrap up one year we start discussing what worked and what didn’t. Venues need to be reserved a year in advance, the program outlined ten months early, and the all speakers secured five months in advance. This is a year-round committee, always with something to do! During the last 4-6 weeks before the event we meet weekly to expedite last-minute tasks and issues.

4. Listen – To receive continuing education units (CEUs) our attendees must turn in a feedback form. The committee reviews them and uses the input to develop the next conference. One year we had multiple requests for more information on pediatric orthopaedics so the following year we had a peds trauma surgeon discuss trends in that area.



Chad Hutchison, RN, BSN, graduated from Michigan State University with his BSN in 2005. He moved to San Diego to start his career at UCSD. He got his ONC in 2010, and became Manager of the 8th floor in February 2012. He is currently working toward his MSN.

Others suggested specific speakers be invited and they were placed on the schedule the next year.

5. Presenters – Nurses are well-represented as presenters. By keeping the ratio of RN presenters above 50%, we qualify for “Category A” CEUs through the National Association of Orthopaedic Nurses (NAON), which

Tips From the Penthouse

The team on 11W hosts an annual Transplant Conference. They are now in their fourth year and average 70 attendees. Nurse Manager Elvie Sevilla and CNS Dianne Warmuth place emphasis on keeping the cost for the event reasonable (\$20 for a half-day), and providing a convenient location (Hillcrest auditorium). Like BONES, they use feedback from each year to refine the next conference. One example of this was to reduce the conference from a full-day to a half-day and split off cardiac transplant to its own day. One key component is having patients as speakers. They also reinforce the day’s teaching with case presentations. While all transplant nurses want to attend, priority is given to new hires. This is seen as a way of expanding on their orientation experience. They caution those thinking about starting a conference to make sure all learning materials are gathered early, healthy food choices are available, and to not underestimate the amount of “behind the scenes” work that needs to be done on the day of the event.

Moving on and Taking the Lessons With You

We had two past committee members transfer to the apheresis unit at Hillcrest. Wouldn't you know, their staff decided they needed a conference too! Because of their experience with BONES, Manager Odette Ada appointed Sherlita Aguilar and Sheryl Alder Co-Chairs for the new conference. Their team has grown and solidified with the addition of administrative personnel. The first Apheresis Conference was held in January 2012. They partnered with key MDs to develop a full-day program for 90-plus RNs and MDs, including some who came from as far away as Seattle. It was so successful that the March 2013 conference is moving to a hotel and is billed as a west-coast national conference. Some learning moments from the first year were in the areas of organization, planning, teamwork, setting a registration deadline, and consistency in leadership. In 2013 they plan to improve their advertisement. They also want to increase involvement of the American Society for Apheresis.

are required for Orthopaedic Nursing Certificate (ONC) maintenance. In addition to the podium presentations we feature poster presentations developed by staff RNs. This is a great way to keep front-line staff involved in the event and give them a chance to learn and teach. This has also been used to fulfill Clinical Nurse III maintenance criteria.

Many of our keynote speakers have been former patients, so we gain valuable patient perspective and have someone with ties to UCSD Orthopaedics. We have been fortunate to have a number of prominent individuals kick-off our events, including a NASCAR driver, a silver-medal Olympian, an NBA superstar, and a former San Diego Charger. This year's keynote is a clinical psychologist specializing in personality who has selected contestants for Survivor, Big Brother, and other reality programs. They have each been generous enough to come speak to our group at no charge. This is an amazing gift and we are always grateful to them. Feedback from conference attendees has let us know

that it's important to have not simply a celebrity, but someone who can deliver a motivational speech and address the profession of nursing. Each presenter receives a token of our appreciation, typically a bottle of wine and whatever our promotional logo item of the year is.

6. Spread the word – we advertise through our local NAON chapter and distribute postcards at national conferences, mail save-the-date notices to our Nursing Education and Development Resources mailing list, email past attendees, and encourage our own staff to attend. We also keep our website updated so if someone does an Internet search they can find us and learn more.

7. Paying the bills – Conferences are expensive! In 2011 the bill for hotel ballroom rental, food and equipment was \$20,000. We try to keep the cost to attendees reasonable, but a majority of our funding comes from registration fees. A portion of our expenses are covered by vendors who come to promote their products. Last year we chose to go green (and save some

“green”) by not providing printed copies of every presentation. Instead, we posted the presentation content on our website for downloading and provided each attendee a notebook to take notes in. A new addition to our program funding is a generous grant from UCSD's Staff Equal Opportunity Enrichment Program. We are grateful to this program for helping us grow our conference.

8. Scholarships – We sponsor conference registration scholarships for eight nursing students. They are distributed evenly among several area nursing schools. This is a way to jump-start the professional development of the next generation of nurses and broaden our scope of attendees. We have other nursing students pay to attend, so we offer a reduced registration fee to keep their cost low.

There are many other things which are critical to a successful event. These include unrelenting enthusiasm, patience with each other, many helping hands on the day of the event, and of course attendees! It's no fun to throw a party if nobody comes, and the conference wouldn't work if people didn't keep coming back year after year.

Last year we presented awards to ten committee members who had been planning this conference since its first year. Of those ten, four of them had since retired! For former “family” members to continue to give of themselves to this event speaks volumes about those individuals and the importance of the conference as well.

