5 REASONS PATIENT ENGAGEMENT IS SIGNIFICANT FOR BETTER HEALTH OUTCOMES AND PATIENT SATISFACTION

One huge topic in practice management these days, and rightly so, is the concept of patient engagement. In the past, financial factors and quantitative factors served quite well to measure how well a practice was doing. But, as qualitative factors such as patient satisfaction came into the forefront, a whole new school of thought was born.

Although health literacy is still astonishingly poor among most populations, many patients are now becoming more actively involved in their care management. They seek answers online, perform their own research, discuss care options with social media circles, check doctor review sites, and want a medical provider who is more than someone they spend a few minutes with each year. They definitely want to become more involved, which is obviously a good thing for improving health outcomes and providing better patient care, but this new approach may take some internal adjustments as to the way an individual practice communicates with its patient base.

The trick is to accomplish increased satisfaction without adding unduly burdensome requirements to the tasks of the care providers. Imagine having patients come in for visits that have completed all of their pre-requisite actions, are up-to-date on their medications, have complete blood test results, and are fully aware of which diagnostic tests still need to be scheduled. The medical professional can then focus on addressing the care issue at hand, while also being able to devote more time to preventative patient care. This leads to a higher degree of patient population health, as well as financial growth for the office since more and more insurers are looking at quality of care, instead of focusing solely on quantity of care.

THE MANDATE FOR INCREASING PATIENT ENGAGEMENT

Not only are patients requiring more information, providers have more mandates from Medicare, insurance companies and the federal government to provide it as well. The 21st Century Cures Act (Cures Act), which was enacted into law on December 13, 2016, includes specific provisions to improve patients' access and use of their electronic health information in a format that is secure and easy to understand. Perhaps one of the most obvious advances in the area of patient communication is the patient portal. Although some practices go way beyond this basic tool, it has quickly become a foundational element of patient engagement.

In 2017, the National Cancer Institute conducted its annual Health Information Trends Survey. According to a data brief compiled by the Institute's Office of the National Coordinator for Health Information Technology:

- As of 2017, 52 percent of individuals have been offered online access to their medical records by a health provider or insurer.
- Over half of those who were offered online access viewed their record within the past year; this represents 28 percent of individuals nationwide.
- Among those who accessed their online medical record within the past year, 8 in 10 considered their online medical record both easy to understand and useful.

TOP TRENDS IN INCREASING PATIENT ENGAGEMENT

In a world of instant access and online familiarity, increasing patient engagement also makes good business sense. The provider can respond to questions during a scheduled time instead of being interrupted for telephone calls or having to leave messages. Team members can reduce the estimated 1-2 hours spent every day in routine patient communication efforts. While a portal allows the team to thereby spend more time on billable activities, it can also lead to increased patient loyalty, as patients feel more connected with the practice.

The Veterans Administration has an online portal, My HealtheVet, where veterans can access mobile apps, view appointments, review blood test and diagnostic procedure results, order prescription refills, read physician notes about their last visit, and engage in secure messaging with their provider. Patients who review their health data are then better prepared for their upcoming visit. The VA also sends out a monthly e-newsletter covering various health topics, and provides appointment reminders via phone, text and email to increase patient compliance.

In addition to improving access through the use of a patient portal, many practices are experimenting with other ways to increase communication levels with patients. Some newer methods include:

Preventative Care
Practices send regular text messages or emails to patients to remind them of preventative healthcare measures. This decreases the number of patients coming to the practice for routine care, and lets the physician focus more on emergent care. Increased texting or messaging to chronic care cases can serve to increase medication compliance.

Improved Appointment and Procedure Preparation
Patients who have a better idea of what to expect are more likely to have a positive view of the outcome of their visit or medical procedure.

Post-Discharge Care and Instructions
Better follow-up with patients after surgical procedures leads to improved recovery rates and reduced visits to the practice or emergency room/ambulatory care center for follow-up care

Electronic Health Records
EHRs allow physicians to have access to a more complete patient health history, communicate more quickly with other involved providers, and obtain crucial test results in a faster and more efficient manner.

Mobile Health
With the rise of the smartphone, mobile apps will play an increasingly important role in how practices engage with patients.

Social Media
While the idea of having a social media presence might have been unthinkable at one time, it is now almost a requirement. Practices are increasing the number of Tweets they send and Facebook posts that provide information, health tips, and links to medical news.

These methods can be effectively applied by practices of all sizes and across all patient populations. Younger patients are especially eager to manage their health care more effectively, but even aging “Baby Boomers” are becoming more digitally advanced and tuned into the benefits of online communications.

HOW TO INCREASE PATIENT ENGAGEMENT

Medical Economics identified six key takeaways for creating a long-term sustained patient engagement strategy for a healthcare technology platform. These steps will help obtain better outcomes for both patients and providers:

1. **Know Your Audience**
   A practice with a senior population will have different engagement needs than a general or family practice. Each population is likely to want to interact in a different manner

2. **Get a Buy-In**
   While some patients will jump right on the engagement wagon, others might be a little more concerned about technology and privacy concerns. Carefully choose who the first patients to engage with will be, and gradually reach out to other demographics by providing more knowledge and explanation.

3. **Include Your Team**
   Make sure your team is well-versed on the benefits of patient engagement and can respond to any inquiries from your patients.

4. **Consider Connectivity**
   Patients are accessing the internet and medical data in many different ways. Have a plan that is compatible with the methods they use for gathering information.

5. **Get Reactions**
   Don't just assume that your program is working because you haven't heard anything negative. Maybe the silence is deafening.

6. **Always Improve**
   Ask your patients about other ways they want to receive information from your practice.

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Thinking outside the box about the ways a practice can increase patient engagement can result in some very tangible results:

1. **Improved Patient Education**
The medical community once thought that patients would not be able to understand all the information related to their care. As it turns out, though, an educated patient is a better patient. Access to risk scores, healthcare data, and trending information leads to patients who are better informed and more knowledgeable about taking control of their own health care.

2. **More Effective Patient Visits**
Practices can use several communication strategies to improve pre-visit care and increase patient compliance. Instead of missing appointments or spending time during the visit trying to remind the patient of needed bloodwork or diagnostic tests, the medical provider can focus attention on the reason for the visit. The informed patient has more intelligent questions to ask, and can request assistance from the doctor on managing some of the high risk score concerns.

3. **Better Practice Productivity**
Appointment notifications are a proven method for minimizing patient no-show rates. With improved patient compliance, the care team can spend less time reminding patients of routine actions they need to take to manage their care. A patient who is more engaged, aware and involved is less likely to miss appointments, forget pre-visit care, or ask routine questions that could be better answered in other formats.

4. **Increased Patient Satisfaction**
Instead of being told what to do, patients feel more involved in their own care. They are likely to give the practice higher ratings because they feel they understand more about their own health, and have a clear set of actions they can take to keep on track. Increased online patient involvement can result in an excellent satisfaction rate for both patients and physicians.

5. **Financial Growth**
While increased productivity and improved quality-of-care reimbursement compliance are two major financial benefits of patient engagement, there are also intangible benefits of practice growth. The first objective of practice growth is always to keep the current patient base, but it is also necessary to attract new patients. Proactive patient alerts can make sure patients keep coming back for necessary appointments, while the improved quality of visit time will lead to increased practice loyalty. Satisfied patients are more likely to refer the practice to their family and friends.