



PEOPLE

Best Methods of Communicating Changes to Patients

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In the era of healthcare reform, many changes are coming down the pike for medical practices and their patients. The responsibility of communicating these and other changes to your patients falls squarely on you. It's important to know what changes need to be communicated, which methods of communicating these changes are useful, how to implement them and what you should be aware of before getting started.



"There are so many changes taking place in healthcare today that it can be confusing, disheartening and at times scary to consumers unless they get the information they need from a source they trust," says Ross K. Goldberg, president of Kevin/Ross Public Relations in Westlake Village, Calif., which has a client base that focuses on healthcare and other business areas. "Patients inherently trust their doctors because of the personal relationship and private information they share. Doctors can foster this trust by communicating with their patients in a timely and accurate manner and explaining changes to them not in theoretical terms, but focusing instead on how the patient personally will or won't be affected by these changes."

With healthcare reform aiming to drive rapid change across the industry by focusing on aligning payment with quality, driving meaningful use of health information technology and putting a premium on patient-centered, patient-focused care, physicians need to master new trades such as proactively caring for patient populations, coordinating care for patients across care settings and engaging and activating their patients to drive improved outcomes, says Drew Vaughn, vice president of business development for PatientPoint, a Cincinnati-based firm focused on helping practices improve patient care. "If care delivery in our country is changing, and putting more 'accountability' on physicians to manage care even outside of the care setting, it's imperative that physicians develop a communication channel to their patients."

Vaughn adds that it's also important to develop a channel to deliver these types of communications because "it's the practice's lifeline to the patient, it lets the patient know that the physician cares about their outcome and not just treating their acute-care need, and it notifies the patient that the practice is now entering a new era of healthcare, which puts more responsibility on the way they use the patient's health information to deliver more-informed care."

To that end, the method of communication is not only imperative for the practice to sustain, but the mechanism by which the physician develops and cultivates the trust relationship with the patient, Vaughn explains.

What needs to be communicated?

Vaughn says physicians need to communicate and proactively notify patients when they are overdue for completing their preventative measures such as mammograms, ensure that patients are adhering to their medication therapies by leveraging reminders for filling their prescriptions and deliver education materials for assisting patients in managing their conditions post care.

Goldberg says migration to electronic health records generates a variety of changes that need to be communicated to patients. "While electronic communication has become part of our everyday world, some people still have major concerns when it comes to the thought of their medical records floating through cyberspace. Physicians can help alleviate patient fear by not only assuring them of the safety and security of these records, but by outlining the many advantages electronic health records bring, including better care, better efficiencies, standardization and patient access."

Another important change to communicate concerns partnerships, ACOs and other new arrangements in which individual physician practices may engage, says Goldberg. “Is the office being moved? Will patients start seeing different caregivers, such as hospitalists or nurse practitioners? Will their bill look different? Again, physicians need to be candid about why this is being done, how it affects the patient and what the patient can expect going forward.”

Finally, he says, there is the “granddaddy of all change, and that is healthcare reform and the implementation of the Affordable Care Act. Patients rightly or wrongly will look to their physician as an expert in the ACA, so physicians need to be prepared to answer questions and provide their patients access to the resources they need to understand the impact of healthcare reform. And they need to communicate about reform in an unbiased, non-political manner.”

Specifically, with regard to the ACA, changes resulting from the paradigm shift in the way care is delivered and reimbursed need to be communicated to patients, says Vaughn. “Practice communications will follow suit in becoming more clinically driven and clinically focused. These types of communications will hinge primarily on making the patient feel comfortable in knowing that their comprehensive care is top of mind for the practice.”

Furthermore, there are a number of regulatory requirements for communicating these types of clinically driven changes, Vaughn adds. “As an example, ACOs and Patient Centered Medical Homes are required to make patients aware of new programs their physicians may have entered into, such as with a health plan for CMS. Additionally, physicians are sometimes even required to allow the patient to opt out of a program, or, alternatively, consent to sharing their personal health information for facilitation of such program.”

What should this communication system include?

There are a number of traditional communication vehicles available to practices, says Goldberg. These include being quoted in a hospital’s newsletter, making yourself available for media interviews, direct mail to patients or speaking at community forums. “But when all is said and done, nothing replaces one-on-one, face-to-face. Talking to a patient in privacy allows for two-way rather than one-way communication, where patients can ask questions and have their individual concerns met in a secure and confidential setting.”

Beyond that, Goldberg adds, “[providers] have been shamefully slow to adapt online communication. I understand all of the reasons why – time, lack of reimbursement from payors, etc. – a but it’s time they got with the program. Doctors who fail to communicate with their patients electronically will soon find out that they have no patients at all.”

Vaughn maintains the communication system itself should be viewed as the practice’s lifeline to the patient and the first line of defense for anything that patient might need. “Patients need to be looked at as ‘consumers’ of healthcare, and their physician practice should be the marketplace at which the look to communicate with the system.”

What else should practices know about communicating changes to patients?

Patient populations are becoming more diverse. Therefore, all communications should be written at an appropriate literacy level for the patient population and should be in the patient’s primary language, says Vaughn.

“Providing this new era of communication will be the driving force for how practices differentiate themselves from one another,” he adds. “The practices that communicate most effectively in a patient-centric healthcare movement will be the leaders in successfully managing their patient populations, while also retaining those populations that they’ve been attributed as part of a value-based contract.”

Goldberg emphasizes that everyone accepts or handles change differently. “Some people need to be told only once, and that’s fine. Some need frequent telling. Some find change exciting, and some find it disruptive. Physicians need to understand this and be respectful of each person’s individual needs.”

Practices also need to understand that there is little in life more personal or important to consumers than the health of themselves and their families, Goldberg adds. “Unfortunately, healthcare has become an overly complex industry loaded with unnecessary jargon, which only makes the distance between the caregiver and the patient that much greater. [Providers] should cut the jargon, speak in simple-to-understand terms and hold sacred the trust and faith their patients have placed in them. That means more than simply delivering care.”