

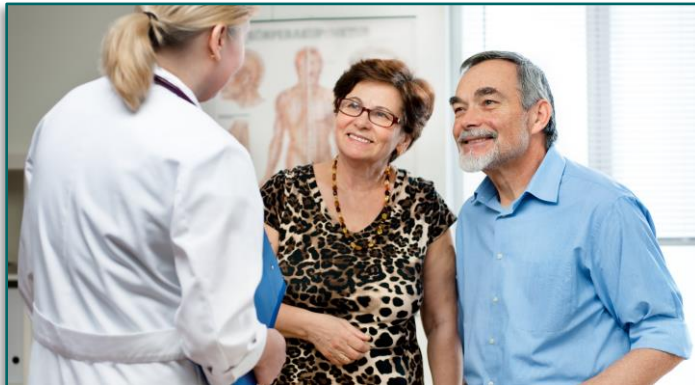


THE FUTURE OF HEALTHCARE FROM THE PATIENT PERSPECTIVE: THE PATIENT EXPERIENCE

With the ever-changing landscape in healthcare, both patients and doctors may have much to be concerned about. Issues of access to care, cost of care and an increasing number of patients turning to the internet in order to self-diagnose has greatly impacted how primary care practices (PCP) deliver their services. Patients are becoming consumers in a very literal sense, forcing practice administrators to focus on innovating new methods of attracting their business, and providing upgraded and value-added services in order to retain existing patients. Better customer service and communication are key areas, with many practices moving to implement telemedicine and other consumer-level technologies to meet patient demand. The patient's role in decision-making is also a key trend, driven by an increasing tendency to 'shop around' for better deals on insurance, diagnostic procedures and more. Today's road forward looks more like a business plan than it does a patient care model.

PATIENT-DOCTOR COMMUNICATION

The ability to communicate directly with a primary care physician is associated with quality of care, and is critical to the successful delivery of healthcare services. By opening the doors to better communication, by listening to the patient's needs and concerns, you are providing the care and support necessary to foster a relationship that promotes healing. In conversations with patients, there is always an opportunity to provide therapeutic support. By encouraging open dialogue, the patient feels supported in making difficult choices, is more confident in pursuing care strategies, and thus more likely to achieve a positive result. The breakdown of patient-doctor communication and a loss of confidence in the ability to confide in one's physician may



be a product of the medical system itself, but there is always an opportunity to turn this around and change the very nature of the relationship. It might be an old-fashioned concept, but the upshot to the physician is better patient loyalty, retention and improved therapeutic outcomes, achieved simply by making an effort to get to know who their patient really is.



THE PATIENT'S ROLE IN DECISION MAKING

Enabling patients to share in the decision making process regarding their care encourages engagement, improves outcomes and allows patients to feel like they are participating in their treatment. In adopting this approach, the PCP acknowledges that the patient is an 'expert' in their own life, and is better able to relay what is important to them and to judge what the expected outcomes, ideally, ought to be. The physician, on the other hand, brings the clinical and technical knowledge. Coming together, they are able to reach an informed agreement to the course of treatment, one that hopefully makes sense to both parties.¹ As each side has their own objectives and concerns, the focus should be on providing options. Treatment options, their benefits and risks, the expediency with which they should or should not be implemented, and even options to do nothing can and should be offered.

Some physicians perceive the extra time that it will take to be the biggest challenge to shared decision making. Though conversation may take more time, it will certainly change the dynamic and direction of the decisions made by both patient and physician. Patients are demanding more involvement in their care. Delivering on this concern will benefit everybody. Win-win!

TELEMEDICINE

Telemedicine has seen a dramatic increase in recent years, due in part to the patient's need for outcome-focused and preventative care, and further driven by higher than average physician caseloads. While not every issue can be diagnosed remotely, the ability to contact and/or speak directly to a care provider serves several purposes. Most importantly, especially from the patient's perspective, it provides improved access to care. It allows physicians to treat housebound patients or those who live outside of practice boundaries, and can be especially valuable when treating mental health issues, or when assessing cardiology, endocrinology, chronic pain and physiotherapy patients. It reduces transmittable risk to other patients, and mitigates stress on patients who are unable to attend an office visit. It can connect doctors in multiple locations, allowing for more expedient specialist consultation. By shortening the time to treatment, further risk can be moderated, and the patient's peace of mind greatly improved.

While traditional medicine is centered on the diagnosis and treatment of acute incidents and emergencies, telemedicine is completely patient-centric and puts the emphasis on outcome-focused care, wellness and self-care of chronic diseases. Practices that commit to the implementation of a telemedicine program may become preferred providers in the very near future, both for convenience and for perceived value on the part of the patient. By offering access to telemedicine, your practice provides valuable options to patients, letting them know that no matter when they need access to their health team, they have it.

¹ <http://www.informedmedicaldecisions.org/ourstory.aspx>



VARIABLES IN CARE EFFICIENCIES

Improving the quality of care does not always go hand in hand with efficiency, financially or otherwise. Many of the concepts outlined in this paper advocate more time spent with the patient, and that really is the heart of the matter when it comes to improved outcomes. There are, however, a number of variables that can be implemented to support efficiency on the administrative side, all of which contribute greatly to patient satisfaction and perceived value. One primary motivator when it comes to quality improvement is the ability to offer the patient both convenience and cost savings. Healthcare providers find themselves under increasing pressure to raise the quality of care while providing value and cost savings. Value can be improved across the board by eliminating problems that may occur when a patient's expectations are not met. These same expectations can be realized by providing collaborative care,² where several modalities can be addressed in your practice, such as providing physical therapy or mental health services to supplement to your practice, these will help to increase patient engagement and overall satisfaction.

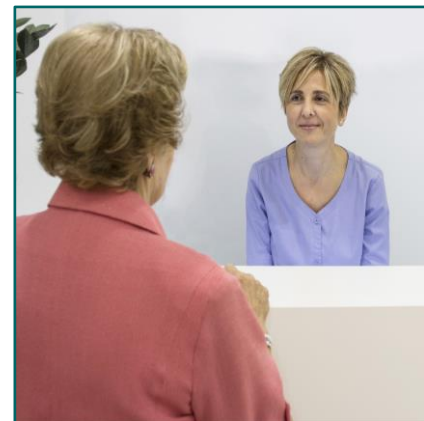
Other ways to offer your patients' more efficiency is by providing in-house ancillary services that represent high value both in time and cost savings. Some of these services might include

- Blood/laboratory facilities;
- Pharmacy services; or
- Diagnostic imaging.

Having these services in your practice delivers on all counts: as a revenue stream for the practice, as another collaborative arm of the healthcare team and as a value-add for the patient.

CUSTOMER SERVICE IN THE PRACTICE

A commitment to your patients is always the best medicine. We are living in an age where every product and service is judged, rated and reviewed, and healthcare is no exception. With the popularity of diagnostic sites such as WebMD, many patients come into an appointment already armed with information, opinions and data, significantly changing the role of the physician. With this in mind, the importance of delivering services that exceed patient expectations is key. This can be achieved through various methods, the most basic of which is your front desk: reception, check-in, checkout, appointment setting and referrals. Appointment reminders and prompting for regular diagnostics are standard practice, but the landscape is changing from a paper or phone-call based system to email, text message, or through the use of auto-callers. Some of the most successful practices use a combination of all three, allowing their patients to choose which method they prefer.



² <https://www.theguardian.com/healthcare-network/2016/mar/01/worlds-most-efficient-health-systems>



Regardless of your patients' demographics, flexibility within your practice will result in patients who feel you care. This is the essence of customer service.

Ultimately, patient care in your practice is no different than it is with any other product or service. The consumer wants information, they want convenience, they want choices and above all, they want to be treated with respect. From back office to front office, customer service is inextricably tied to value in the eyes of your patients.

THE PATIENT-CENTRIC CONCLUSION

Think of your patients as customers. Your practice can easily over-deliver if they follow through on some simple concepts:³

- The doctor and frontline staff listen, and thoroughly explain things;
- The doctor involves the patient in their care and treatment;
- The entire office team is involved in patient care;
- The office is a welcoming, comfortable place;
- The wait times are reasonable;
- Front-end staff are helpful and friendly;
- You care about how much things will cost the patient;
- You offer ancillary services for patient convenience;
- You return phone calls;
- You are transparent about costs and try to offer alternatives;
- You consider patients' values with regard to their treatment; and
- You are respectful of patients' time, money and state of mind.

Lest we forget, it's all about the healing. It starts with compassion, and a smile. Focus first on the patient, and the needs will become self-evident.



³ <http://www.kevinmd.com/blog/2016/04/american-health-care-has-a-customer-service-problem.html>