How a Patient Portal Can Improve Patient Engagement

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WHITE PAPER

Specialty healthcare providers that offer a patient portal can improve patient engagement, which may support better outcomes. To achieve the fullest benefits of a portal, these clinicians and their staffs may need to guide and encourage their patients to use it.

HOW A PATIENT PORTAL
can improve patient engagement.

Today's healthcare system is putting more emphasis on patient engagement. The Center for Advancing Health (CFAH) defines engagement as "actions individuals must take to obtain the greatest benefit from the healthcare services available to them."[3]

Advancements in technology are positioning specialty healthcare providers and patients to easily exchange more information between office visits. In order to meet these engagement trends, patient portals are quickly becoming the standard throughout the health care industry.

Patient portals are secure websites that give patients a connection to their clinicians around the clock. Depending on the features of the specific portal, patients may be able to access information about their health, consult educational materials, make appointments, ask for prescription refills and contact their providers.[1]

A 2014 survey of more than 2,000 American adults found that 36 percent were using a patient portal. Of those who weren't using a portal, 57 percent thought they would be "more interested and proactive in their personal health care" if they had this type of access.[2]

The CFAH has assembled a framework of engagement behaviors that individuals need to adopt in order to get the most benefit from their health care. A patient portal can support many of these activities, such as making appointments, nurturing the doctor-patient relationship, properly conveying important information, participating in treatment, and becoming educated on illnesses and their treatments.[5]

A recent Health Affairs article noted research is finding that "patients who are more actively involved in their health care experience better health outcomes"[4] and may also be more satisfied with their health care.

PORTALS support
communication and access to providers.

In a 2013 study, researchers gathered feedback from 54 adults who had used a patient portal offered by a university medical center. A number of patients said they appreciated the ability to schedule appointments or request prescription refills through the portal.[6]

They also enjoyed having the option of communicating with their clinicians using a secure messaging feature. The users felt that the providers responded faster to this messaging system than a phone call. In addition, some preferred to communicate through the portal so they'd have a written record of the provider's response that they could re-read later.

The secure messaging feature can be utilized for a variety of situations. For example, one patient used this feature to ask whether lab tests would be necessary before the next visit. In another case, a patient was able to observe in her electronic medical record that she'd had a past allergic reaction to a medication that her provider was recommending – potentially preventing an adverse event.

In a 2015 review of earlier research on patient portals, the authors noted several studies evaluating secure messaging services that found "a high level of patient satisfaction with the feature," as well as "the perception of high-quality care, better patient-to-provider communication, greater levels of patient education, and a high level of patient engagement and empowerment."[7]

PORTALS can tap patients' interest in engaging online, taking more control

Many businesses have been happy to let them take on that expanded role. As a group of physicians noted in a recent Medical Economics essay on patient engagement, "Other industries, when faced with the quandary of accomplishing more with less, have resorted to customer-empowerment initiatives. As customers, we now do our own banking, pump our own gas, assemble our own furniture, check ourselves in at the airport and out at the grocery store." [11]

Likewise, this same kind of empowerment has made its way into the health care industry. According to the Pew Research Center's Internet & American Life Project survey, 69 percent of American adults monitor one or more health indicators for themselves or a loved one,[12] suggesting that patient portals can offer the type of engagement that many health consumers desire.

The evolution of the Internet and social media has allowed people to access tons of information with the click of a button. Consequently, this has led to consumers taking more responsibility of the day-to-day aspects in their lives.

CLINICIANS must help patients
connect with the benefits of their portal

Despite the obvious benefits, health care providers who offer a portal to their patients find that not all of them adopt it easily or use it frequently. In 2015, researchers who analyzed how patients used a portal noted: [14] "Our data indicates that the 'if you build it, they will come' assumption so often associated with (health information technology) may be a false hope, at least for the types of patients studied."

However, health care providers can help drive greater portal acceptance in their practices by responding quickly to patients' electronic messages. In one study, several patients mentioned waiting days – or weeks – for a response to their messages, leaving them to alter their medication regimen on their own or consider switching to a new doctor. As the authors noted, "Participants were less inclined to use (secure messaging) after a negative experience."[6]

In addition, clinicians and office staff must demonstrate their interest in this system if they want the patients to use it. As the National Learning Consortium noted, "Patients are more likely to adopt and use a patient portal if their providers recommend and support portal use."[15]
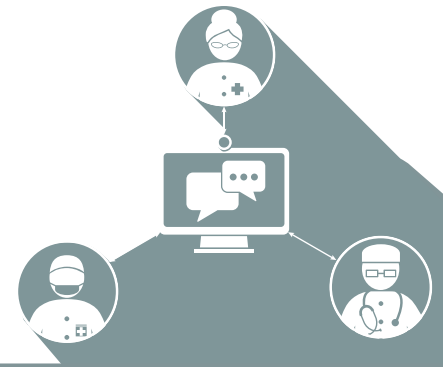
A 2015 review from the Journal of Medical Internet Research evaluated the types of portal features that drew positive feedback from users. Some of the benefits of portals included:[13]	Time savings for clinicians, including easier documentation.
	More productive office visits with patients who had obtained helpful information before they arrived.
	Lower rates of patient no-shows.
	Better adherence to appropriate glaucoma medication after using Internet-based support. While this did not involve a portal per se, the authors noted better patient involvement and outcomes when patients had access to clinical data and support online.

PORTALS improve engagement

Some steps that can help ensure that your patient portal will improve engagement, according to the National Learning Consortium, include: [15]

Promoting its use.

Use your entire staff to support the portal. Promotional efforts may include signs and brochures in the waiting room, a computer for staff to help patients register and learn how to use the portal, and provider-initiated discussions about the portal's functions during patient visits.

Planning the portal's rollout.

Give thought to whether you want to offer the portal to your entire patient group at once, or begin with a smaller set of patients and providers to gather feedback and grow more comfortable with the system.

Focusing on patient-centered outcomes.

The portal must be convenient and easy to use from your patients' perspective. Different patients will focus on different features, and they'll be particularly interested in features that solve problems and services that are interactive and personalized.

As a 2014 Medical Economics article noted, certain types of patients may get more benefit from a portal's services, such as individuals who:[16]

- Have chronic conditions.

- Have a role in monitoring their health at home, then reporting data to a provider.

- Receive care from multiple providers.

PORTALS support communication

Using a portal, patients can maintain more consistent communication with their health care providers from home between visits. They may also have more access to information related to their health, such as records from previous visits, new lab results and educational materials.

By selecting a portal system that meets their patients' needs – such as Nextech's patient portal – health care providers can help foster an environment of improved patient engagement and care.

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Research has found that patients who are more interested in learning about their health and helping to manage it are more likely to practice preventive strategies.[17]

What is a patient portal? http://www.healthit.gov/providers-professionals/faqs/what-patient-portal

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