Best Practices for Patient Portals

The key is convincing patients to embrace practice portals.

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At their most basic level, patient portals are web pages containing patient data that healthcare providers make available to their patients. One example would be a page that takes the form of a physician's schedule, enabling patients to schedule their next visit. Although this may have been cutting-edge technology two decades ago, today patients have much higher expectations. Moreover, physicians and back office staff have come to look at patient portals as a means of offloading expensive and time-consuming scheduling and patient education tasks. Consequently, it is in the group practice's best interest to convince patients that its patient portal provides demonstrable value, such as saving time during practice visits.

Although there are myriad issues surrounding patient portals, from legal liability to levels of electronic medical record (EMR) integration, they are undeniably increasingly important for group practices. Convincing patients to embrace this mode of interaction requires attention to patients' medical needs as well as their lifestyles. Group practices can encourage a high rate of use of their patient portals when these portals:

• Provide timely access to patient data;

• Seamlessly integrate with the EMR;

• Enable connectivity with relevant vertical portals;

• Ensure privacy and security of patient data;

• Support popular hardware platforms and operating systems;

• Support an easy-to-use and easy-to-learn interface; and

• Compete technologically with patient portals provided by major healthcare enterprise systems and popular consumer portals.

Timely Access to Patient Data

Properly implemented patient portals free patients from calling in to the practice to learn, for example, the results of their lab tests. The access to patient data has to be at least as timely as the data that could be obtained by calling in and requiring a nurse or office worker to find the results.

Seamless Integration with Electronic Medical Records

Full EMR integration is key to the success of a patient portal. Partial integration is, at best, frustrating, unless there is a good clinical reason to withhold data from a particular patient—for example, the psychiatric record of a patient who might be upset after reading his or her diagnosis. Ideally, full integration includes patient-specific FAQs on their diagnosis, the treatment—including side effects, and other information the patient needs to be a full participant in his or her healthcare.

Connectivity with Vertical Portals

Vertical portals, which are Web portals dedicated to a specific clinical instrument or vendor, are increasingly common in healthcare. For example, vendor-specific glucose monitoring portals enable diabetics and their physicians to monitor glucose levels over time, with alarms sent to both patient and physician when levels stray outside a specified acceptable range. Similarly, cardiac telemetry portals are available that support patients being monitored for various arrhythmias.

Like the clinical systems of old, these vertical portals are designed as stand-alone systems, with external connectivity to other patient portals an afterthought at best. To obtain maximum patient utilization of your patient portal, convince the vendor to at least provide links to the vertical portals. Following links is not the ideal level of integration, but at least it saves the patient some time and effort.

Privacy and Security

From a legal perspective, your practice portal must comply with usual HIPAA rules, in terms of maintaining privacy and security of patient data. However, in addition to this obvious requirement, your practice portal should provide patients with the sense that their information is secure and their records are private. Your portal vendor can create this sense of security by emphasizing the importance of adequate password protection, stored questions and patient answers, and other techniques employed by banks for their secure portals.

Platform Agnostic

Patients employ a variety of hardware and software platforms to access data on the Web, and your practice portal should be no exception. If you

167

INFORMATION **TECHNOLOGY**

are shopping for a patient portal vendor, one criterion should be the ability to access the patient portal from the most popular smartphones, tablets, laptops, and desktop computers. Anything less flexible is a liability, and indicates you are dealing with a vendor that is behind the times.

Easy-to-Learn and Easy-to-Use Interface

As with any software application, patient portals must be both easy to learn and easy to use. There is no excuse for an interface that is not intuitive, efficient, and easy to use. Patients certainly are not going to read through an instruction manual, and they should not have to. Usability standards have been established for websites, including portals. Vendors simply have to adhere to these proven standards. If not, expect poor patient compliance.

Technologic Relevance

From a technologic perspective, practice portals must at least meet patient expectations by keeping pace with features supported by both major healthcare enterprise portals and the most popular consumer portals. If your practice operates within the territory served by a large healthcare enterprise, patients certainly will be aware of the competing technologies. Similarly, your patient portal will be compared to the portals established by vendors in the local mall, regional stores, and other commercial outlets. If your patient portal is technologically behind the times, patients will look elsewhere.

Conclusion

The patient portal is an important tool in the modern practice toolbox. By replacing real-time patient conversations with a trusted patient portal, patients can get the information they need, when they need it. Moreover, when properly implemented, this patient support comes at a nominal cost to providers. From a customer relationship management perspective, patient portals promise to increase patient loyalty to the practice and increase the patient's commitment to taking responsibility for his or her own healthcare. By providing a patient portal with the features discussed in this article, you can maximize the odds that your patient portal will be embraced by your patients, resulting in a win–win for your patients and your bottom line. **PM**

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