Patient Portals and the Drumbeat of Patient Demand

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It shouldn’t take another cataclysmic event for consumers to realize how much they need personal health information. Survivors of Katrina, Rita, and the September 11th attacks have a different outlook on the patient portal and personal health record than most of us. As do the cancer-surviving father of four and the mother of a Type 1 diabetic son. American consumers have been fickle about adopting electronic access to health information. “What’s the point if my physician can’t access it?” one new mother asked. But a 2012 Manhattan Research study has pointed out that 62% of physicians are already using a tablet device for professional purposes, doubling the use since last year.

Software developers know that ‘stickiness’ is the secret to engaging users. There has to be a reason for the users to come back. Patient safety, increased patient responsibility and reducing costs are notable public health measures. But it’s the doctor, not public health that is on the mother’s mind when her child suffers an asthmatic episode.

Patient portals bring new meaning to the patient-physician relationship if it can be accomplished in a secure platform. A patient either trusts a physician or finds one they can. Patient portals are helping to bridge that gap.

Physician Core Values about Health IT

In 2011, The Markle Survey of Health in a Networked Life compared the core values of physicians and the general public on the deployment of information technology in health care. The survey found the following results:

- 74% of physicians want to share information with other professionals electronically
- 74% of physicians said patients should be able to share patient information electronically
- About 80% of consumers and doctors agreed that hospitals and doctors should be required to share information to better coordinate care, cut unnecessary costs, and reduce medical errors.
- 94% of physicians said patients at least sometimes forget or lose track of potentially important things they are told during the doctor visit.
- 34% of doctors said sometimes they forget or lose track of potentially important things that patient tell them.
- 30% of patients believe their doctors forget or lose track of something important.
Benefits of a Patient Portal to Health Care Professionals

The revolution that placed more than 400,000\(^1\) ATMs across America is analogous to what may finally be happening in the healthcare industry now. A January 2011 HealthLeaders Media Intelligence report revealed that only 25% of EHR-equipped physician practices have patient portals and only 21% of hospital-based systems have them. While these numbers have surely increased in the time since, there is still a significant chunk of the provider space that does not yet offer a portal to their patient base.

Proponents of patient portals point to the increased cost-savings, productivity, and overall efficiencies afforded by the technology. Providers who are ahead of the game have already reported many types of dollar savings resulting from a portal.

“The return on investment for providers is a great reason why organizations should look to add a patient portal,” says Rick Altinger, Vice-President of Product Management at Intuit. Patient portals offer valuable boosts in efficiency, effectiveness, and productivity:

- Secure portal e-mail messaging improves provider productivity to the tune of $95 per day per physician by freeing up time for additional patient visits, according to a 2005 study by Liederman, et al. For an average 3-physician practice, this could amount to $102,600 of additional revenue per year! Health Data Management Magazine, in March 2010, reported that some providers enjoyed savings of $0.63 for mailing costs of lab results, $17 for online billing questions (as opposed to the telephone), and $7 for each appointment scheduled online. By making administrative tasks more efficient and staff more productive, patient portals can dramatically improve an organization’s bottom line.

- Patients and family members have access to an accurate record of the visit. This may be a revolutionary defense mechanism where the patient may no longer be able to say, “You said…” Furthermore, physicians often choose to release the encounter summary into the patient portal within three days of the patient visit, although this is now a Meaningful Use requirement upon patient request.

- Many providers have noted that, since using a patient portal, they have been able to spend more time actually treating the patient in the exam room, efficiently improving the delivery of care. Since the patient can fill out an updated medical and prescription history at home, providers no longer have to go over the tedious checklist of questions that can eat up valuable encounter time. A clinician will still need to verify the information is correct, but even this will save valuable time. Furthermore, patients have reported that being able to access test results and medical information at their own convenience helps bond them more closely to their provider.

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\(^1\) Gammon, Katharine, “ATMs by the Numbers” Wired Magazine August 24, 2009,
Administrative staff also feels the increased proficiency due to patients filling in demographic and payer information before arriving at a clinic. Hilary Bias, EMR manager and clinic supervisor at the Kansas City Bone & Joint Clinic, who have had a portal since 2008, states “We’ve noticed much more efficiency at patient check-in. It takes us three minutes to get a patient checked in when it used to take 10-15. This allows us to move patients to the exam room faster.”

Online bill pay is a feature in patient portals that has received praise from patients and providers alike. Patients like the ease and control of paying medical bills at their own convenience, and providers are seeing that payments are likely to be made quicker when patients are able to review bills at home.

Patient portals have also assisted in improving patient engagement by supporting patients in making personal choices and managing health, especially chronic conditions. This in turn has helped improve clinical quality outcomes.

Patient portals have also allowed patients to take ownership of their own health record. Patients seeing their summaries and health information can potentially find incorrect information, which can then be corrected directly in the records.

Drumbeat of Patient Demand

Even as early as 2006, a study by Harris Interactive and the Wall Street Journal revealed that patients were more than ready to connect online with their providers if privacy and security of protected health information could be assured.

Altinger, with Intuit, adds, “There’s been a continued drumbeat of patients demanding that they have access to a patient portal. Not only do surveys and studies back that up, but we’re also hearing it directly from the patients themselves.”

What Should Providers Look For in a Patient Portal?

The concept of a patient portal has been around since the 1990s, but it wasn’t until the HITECH Act and the accompanying Meaningful Use requirements came out that healthcare organizations were really pushed to implement one. Meaningful Use requirements placed a priority on patient engagement and outreach, making patient portals a viable outlet to accomplish those goals. The central objective of a patient portal is to improve both quality and access to care through features that allow patients to manage clinical and administrative functions with a healthcare provider.

Patient portals come in a few varieties that healthcare organizations should be aware of before making an investment. There are stand-alone web-based portal applications (Microsoft Healthvault), third-party portal vendors (i.e. Kryptiq, Intuit Health) that interface with existing EHRs, and integrated portals developed by EHR vendors themselves (i.e. Epic, NextGen, eClinicalWorks). Despite these variances, the
common thread between all of these models is the ability for patients to interact with their medical information via the Internet.

Patient portals must allow for secure, HIPAA-compliant, two-way communication between the provider and patient to maintain privacy and security standards. While features of a patient portal do vary, most do include functionality relating to registration, financial clearance, medical history, appointment scheduling, specialty referrals, test results, messaging, online bill payment, and prescription renewals.

In most cases, physicians set protocols that define what a patient can access. When it comes to the clinical summary, these protocols also meet standards for the Continuity of Care Document. The basics include:

- Your primary care doctor's name and phone number
- Allergies, including drug allergies
- Health Plan Subscriber Information
- Emergency Contact information
- Current medications, including dosages
- Chronic health problems, such as high blood pressure (Problem List)
- Care management plans
- Educational materials to help manage a condition or post-surgical treatment
- Major surgeries, with dates
- Living will or advance directives
- Results of screening tests
- Cholesterol level and blood pressure
- Exercise and dietary habits
- Health goals, such as stopping smoking or losing weight

**Reaching Out To Your Patients**

Without strong patient usage of a patient portal, the boost in productivity is lost on the provider. Many healthcare organizations have reported meaningful adoption of their patient portal. The world-renowned Cleveland Clinic counted approximately 25 percent of their patient base enrolled in its patient portal, but with a total active user base of 225,000. On a much smaller scale, Hilary Bias at the Kansas City Bone and Joint Clinic reports, “We have an adoption rate of about 40%, about 11,000 patients.”

However, healthcare organizations have realized that it is an ongoing effort and a fairly well defined digital strategy to engage patients in the portal. On the initial roll-out, Bias states, “We conducted an informal survey as patients were checking out to gauge interest in a portal. We got e-mail addresses from those who were interested and sent out e-mail blasts in the lead-up to launch to keep them informed. Patients came in to register and by launch, we had a sizable patient base ready.”
Other organizations have used brochures, TV, radio and magazine ads to educate patients about the advantages of using their portal. The Cleveland Clinic even sends a postcard whenever a new feature is released, citing the colorful logos and text as more successful than having patients open letters. One way to persuade patients is to communicate that by filling out necessary information in the portal, they might only have to show up ten minutes before an appointment instead of thirty.

“One story I always think of when talking about our patient portal,” recalls Bias. “We had a patient message us late one evening to ask if we treated a specific rare hand condition. The next morning, we saw the message, got his health information completed in the portal, and had him seen and scheduled for surgery by 11:00 AM.” Success stories like these are a great way to communicate the effectiveness of a patient portal to prospective and existing patients.

In most cases, physicians usually hold the key to drive patient engagement in the portal. One-on-one discussions in the physician’s office are often times the best way to explain the benefits of the patient portal, and physician enthusiasm will generate greater usage of the portal by patients.

**Present Challenges**

For all the benefits of a patient portal, it does not come without challenges. As providers are currently investing in EHR technology, some of those providers are reluctant to spend even more money on a patient portal. The upfront costs and implementation workload are fairly significant, but Intuit’s Rick Altinger states, “The patient portal shouldn’t be looked at as an add-on anymore. It’s becoming a necessary feature for a practice to stay viable.” Meaningful use incentive funds can help offset some of the costs of implementing a patient portal.

Some physicians have also been slow to implement a patient portal for reasons beyond cost, worrying about lack of reimbursement, inappropriate use, liability issues, workflow change, staff retraining, among other concerns. Privacy and security are also valid apprehensions for providers and patients alike. Patients foremost have to be assured that their protected health information is safe and secure before they can use the portal. Many organizations are only enrolling patients in person for the portal to ensure identity validity and minimize fraudulent behavior.

Meaningful Use requirements have also presented a challenge and worry to healthcare organizations. The proposed Stage 2 objectives would push providers to demonstrate that “more than 10% of patients families view and have some ability to download information about an encounter” within 36 hours of discharge. Providers fear that this requirement is out of their direct control and may not be met.

Another significant challenge arises for patients who visit multiple providers. The patient portal may only represent a fragmented view of their complete medical record. The ability to pull information from disparate systems is still in its infancy and presents a unique challenge moving forward.
Future Innovations
As patient portals secure a foothold within healthcare organizations and more patients expect to be connected to their provider via portal, the technology will evolve. Mobile devices have permeated the consumer culture, to the point where most people wouldn’t leave the house without one. Bias states, “We have a number of patients that would love to see messaging from a mobile application.”

Also pointing to the future, Altinger adds, “40% of our e-mail notifications are read on a mobile device. When you are getting that e-mail on mobile, you need to be able to interact right then and there, on the go.” Patients will likely communicate with their providers in briefer, more frequent messages as more and more turn to smartphones and tablets to connect.

For providers, they may start seeing a shift in reimbursement strategies from payers. Insurers are seeing portals as a potential cost-saving opportunity as opposed to the more expensive visit-based reimbursement. Sending an e-mail and interacting online with a patient gives a solid measure of reimbursement. Many payers already pay for e-visits, including Aetna, CIGNA, and several Blue Cross/Blue Shield plans, and the trend is expected to continue.

Envisioning the Time Ahead
As the banking industry realized years ago, consumer engagement is a very effective and powerful tool. Patient portals offer the same pathways to involve patients in the delivery of their own care. The long-term efficiencies, productivity boosts, and patient satisfaction realized by providers far offset the initial headaches of implementation and workflow redesign caused by a patient portal.

For organizations that may fear the plunge, Altinger offers, “Encourage physicians to ask their patients. Realize that their patients want this. Portals are something that is here to stay and the return on investment should sway any physician that may be weary.”

Patient portals are not just a technology initiative, but should be seen as a strategic goal for an organization. We aren’t far away from a time when portals become a basic expectation of care for patients. Ensure that your healthcare organization is prepared to meet patient demand and deliver a higher level of care.
Resources:

1. Will Patient Portals Open the Door to Better Care?
2. Patient Portals: A Look Forward
3. Portals Hold Promise for Patient Engagement but Challenges Remain
4. CIOs Prepare for Patient Portals
5. Measuring the Impact of Patient Portals: What the Literature Tells Us
6. Patient Portals: A Jumpstart on Meeting Meaningful Use Requirements
7. Patient Portals: A Path to Increased Productivity and Happier Patients
8. The Personal Health Records Page