

IMPROVING QUALITY AND INCREASING AFFORDABILITY IN HEALTHCARE: THE ROLE OF EDUCATION IN PATIENT ENGAGEMENT

BY SUSAN R. GRADY, MSN, RN-BC, MEDSCAPE EDUCATION, LLC; MAZI RASULNIA, PHD, PACK HEALTH, LLC.

VIGNETTE 1

Tom is 67 and has hypertension. He is being treated with angiotensin-converting enzyme (ACE) inhibitors and a diuretic. He sometimes fails to take the diuretic during the day because the effects interfere with work. Because he is taking his medication at night, he is not sleeping well.

Physician: Come in, Tom. I haven't seen you in a while. What's going on?

Tom: Well, I'm not getting much sleep. I'm getting up a lot to go to the bathroom.

Physician: OK. I can see how that would affect your sleep [glances at notes]. And I see that your blood pressure's a bit high, certainly higher than the last time I saw you. And that was a while ago.

Tom: Well, life's pretty busy.

Physician: Yes, but if you don't come in, we can't keep track of your blood pressure.

[Tom says nothing]

Physician: [Writes in chart then looks up]: And are you taking your medications? Are these working out for you?

Tom: You know, I sometimes think they may be part of the problem. I try to take 'em, but I miss some days. And I ran out of them about a week ago.

Physician: [Shakes his head]: Again, it's really important to take your medication. Otherwise, we can't control your blood pressure.

Tom leaves the office feeling chastised with no real solution to his sleeping problems.



Introduction

Patient engagement is widely recognized as an important ingredient for increasing positive patient outcomes and improving healthcare quality in the United States. Yet many patients feel disengaged from health care and from their healthcare providers, and when patients are not active in their own care, the affordability and quality of health care suffer. At the same time, many healthcare providers lack time or are unclear about how to get patients involved in decisions about their care and do not have the incentives in place to involve patients in decisions about their care.

The field of education is uniquely positioned to lead efforts to improve patient engagement, especially when harnessed to health information technologies. Patients and clinicians increasingly rely on online resources and digital technology to acquire health-related information. Gaining health information is just the first step in facilitating engagement; the process is a multifactorial combination of education, tools, and support to facilitate better understanding and outcomes by patients. Patient and clinician educators can build on this existing foundation to deliver timely information that enhances patient-provider communication and supports patients to take an active role in their health and health care.



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Transforming Healthcare Quality Through Patient Engagement

Health Care in Crisis

It is no secret that the quality of healthcare in the United States is in crisis. When health care is evaluated on its ability to increase life expectancy and curb individual and national costs, the United States ranks 44th out of 51 nations for life expectancy, the cost of health care as a percentage of the gross domestic product, and total medical expenditure per person.¹ In addition, multiple patient behavior studies affirm that approximately 50% of patients do not adhere to prescribed medications and 83% do not follow provider recommendations,² thereby limiting the potential for reducing chronic diseases with a significant lifestyle component, such as diabetes. Beyond these statistics, it is an unrealistic expectation to curb cost and improve quality during the average brief 15-minute office visit.

In response to this crisis, patient groups, employers, health plan administrators, and government payers have all increasingly called for a system of care that is more responsive to patient needs, as well as for strategies to engage patients as decision makers in their health care.^{3,4} For instance, patient engagement—through shared decision making and active disease self-management—is widely recognized as an important ingredient for transforming health care. Indeed, the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act (ACA) has identified a larger role for patients in their own care as a cornerstone of successful healthcare reform by establishing the National Strategy for Quality Improvement in Health Care (NQS). The NQS emphasizes the principle of patient engagement and is a catalyst for improving population health, reducing the cost of health care, and improving healthcare quality.⁵

But what is patient engagement?

Defining Patient Engagement

Several leading healthcare quality improvement organizations such as the Commonwealth Fund, the Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality, and Planetree have developed definitions of patient engagement (also called patient activation). For instance, the Center for Advancing Health defines patient engagement as the “[A]ctions individuals must take to obtain the greatest benefit from the health care services available to them.”⁶ Such actions might include preparing a list of questions to ask healthcare providers prior to an office visit, bringing a list of medications and a summary of an individual's current medical history to discuss during the visit, and following up on test results after the visit.

Similarly, the NQS frames patient engagement as efforts in which providers and payers offer patients—and the people who support them in their decisions about health and healthcare—the information they need in order to make healthcare choices that are right for them. Information provision and other strategies to empower patients to actively participate in decisions about their own health need to be placed in the context of continuous and regular interaction with providers across different healthcare settings.⁷ Based on this idea of engagement as a continuum, researchers have developed tools such as the Patient Activation Measure™ to gauge patient readiness to engage and to measure how engagement influences experiential and clinical outcomes.^{4,8}

Why is patient engagement important? Evidence suggests that patients who are engaged in their care—who are working with their clinicians and whose needs and preferences are taken into account—have better healthcare experiences, are better equipped to make informed and personally relevant decisions about their care,⁹ have better clinical outcomes, and have lower healthcare costs.¹⁰

ENGAGED. EMPOWERED
PATIENTS ARE CENTRAL TO
ACHIEVING BETTER OUTCOMES
AT A BETTER VALUE.¹⁵

The Benefits of Patient Engagement

Better Healthcare Experiences

Engaged patients are more likely to:

- Prepare questions to ask a provider prior to a clinical encounter⁸;
- Know about treatment guidelines for their condition⁸;
- Act assertively in their consultation^{4,11};
- Have positive care experiences, fewer care coordination problems, and improved quality of life^{12,13}; and
- Have lower rates of hospitalizations, 30-day hospital readmission, and emergency department visits.¹⁴

Better Clinical Outcomes

Compared with less-engaged patients, engaged patients are more likely to^{4,8,15}:

- Adhere to treatment and prevention plans
- Increase healthy behaviors and use of preventive care (eg, physical activity, smoking cessation, screenings, immunizations)
- Use health care appropriately (ie, not delay care)
- Effectively self-manage chronic conditions (eg, regular eye examinations, blood pressure measurements, and blood glucose monitoring)
- Recover more rapidly
- Experience fewer diagnostic tests and referrals

Ultimately, the goals of engagement—the benefits of which are deep—are to increase positive patient outcomes and improve healthcare quality.

The Role of Education in Patient Engagement

Despite the proven benefits of patient engagement for improving both the affordability and quality of health care, many patients who want to be engaged in decisions about their health care may lack the resources or skills to do so.³ Additionally, many clinicians do not currently view their role as enabling patients to engage and are concerned about the additional time, costs, and potentially lower efficiency that patient engagement could require.¹⁶

Patient-centered education can be a powerful tool to support patients in taking informed action about their health care. Specifically, education can equip patients to take small, manageable steps before, during, and after clinical encounters,¹⁷⁻¹⁹ and provide strategies that motivate patients to ask questions, know their medications and medical history, bring friends or relatives to appointments for support, and learn about care that may be unnecessary.^{8,20}

Education can also help providers develop communication skills known to increase patient satisfaction, encourage adherence, reduce medication errors, and improve outcomes, as well as teach them how they can use technology more effectively to foster engagement.¹¹

For both patients and healthcare providers, online resources and digital technologies offer a platform for educational activities and resources that can help build patient engagement.

Online Resources and Digital Technologies: The Foundation for Patient Engagement

Although there is a lot of pressure in a typical office visit for clinicians to gather and document patient information and for patients to air their concerns and ask questions, there is rarely enough time to do so. Indeed, patients in the United States spend on average less than 1 hour per year in face-to-face clinical encounters with healthcare providers.

LOWERING COSTS THROUGH ENGAGEMENT

A large, cross-sectional study examined electronic health records and billed cost data from a primary care population of 33,163 patients in a large not-for-profit healthcare system in Minnesota. Patients with the lowest activation levels as measured by the Patient Activation Measure™ had predicted average costs that were 8% higher in the base year and 21% higher in the first half of the next year than the costs of patients with the highest activation levels, both significant differences; lower engagement levels were also predictive of higher future costs compared with patients with higher levels of engagement.¹⁰

EVIDENCE-BASED STRATEGIES TO PROMOTE PATIENT ENGAGEMENT

Evidence-based patient engagement strategies that educate patients before, during, and after a clinical encounter include^{3,8,9}:

- Educational toolkits that provide information on condition, sense of empowerment over condition, service satisfaction, and knowledge to aid in coping with condition
- Counseling, coaching, and helplines to foster the ability to analyze and ask questions on condition, improve self-efficacy, and increase adherence to treatment
- Decision aids to build patient ability to assess risk and treatment options, and to reduce the use of unnecessary healthcare services
- Question prompts/checklists to promote consultation that may lead to better decision making
- Healthcare professional training to enhance patient-provider interaction

VIGNETTE 2

Before **Tom** visited his provider, he took an online educational quiz about living with hypertension. The activity generated a report that provided him with information about the benefits and side effects of antihypertensive medications, including diuretics, and listed some questions that Tom was able to ask his doctor at his next visit. Armed with these resources, Tom felt not only in more control of the clinical encounter, but also that he was more actively involved in making a decision about his treatment. And Tom's provider was impressed that his patient was informed and willing to consider a change in medication.

Physician: I understand that you're worried about losing sleep and having to visit the bathroom so often. What's the most helpful thing I can do for you today?

Tom: I thought perhaps we could review my medications. I'm supposed to take the blood pressure med twice a day and the fluid tablet once. I sometimes forget to take my meds in the morning, so I usually end up taking both a blood pressure pill and the fluid pill at night, before bed. I researched this a little and it looks as though this might be messing up my sleep.

Physician: OK, it sounds as though we need to find a way to make it easier for you to take your medications. The blood pressure medicine is supposed to be taken three times a day, but maybe that's not practical for you. We could find a different medicine that you only have to take once a day. That would also help your sleep. What do you think?

Tom: Making it easier to take my medication is definitely good—I sure could use the sleep.

Physician: And if it's easier for you to take your medication, that's going to help control your blood pressure, too. Tom, I'm also going to give you a prescription to learn more about your health. Go through these activities and we can discuss any questions you have at your next visit.

Take patient engagement to the population level. To learn more, visit www.medscape.org/vision or contact Chris Hoffman at choffman@medscape.net.



This time deficit undermines the potential for engagement, in no small measure because the amount of information patients correctly recall from clinic visits is staggeringly small. Memory research shows that patients immediately forget 40% to 80% of the medical information that healthcare providers give them during an office visit and incorrectly recall almost half of the information that they are able to remember.²¹

**59% OF ALL ADULTS
IN THE US USE THE
INTERNET TO SEARCH FOR
HEALTH INFORMATION.²³**

Practical solutions for enhancing patient engagement that acknowledge this time crunch are emerging. The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation has created a “flipped classroom” strategy that relieves pressure at the point of care by using technology to arm patients with information before the office visit and providing tools to manage their health after the visit.²²

Solutions like this are possible because both patients and clinicians are already using online resources and digital technologies to seek out health-related information and engage with each other. The Pew Research Center recently reported that in the 12 months prior to the survey, 59% of US adults used the Internet to search for health-related information.²³ At the same time, clinicians are increasingly using social media and mobile technologies to monitor physiologic data—such as blood glucose—and coach patients in disease self-management; they also use health information technologies to increase patient access to his or her own health information.²⁴

Education to Encourage Engagement

Education can foster engagement by encouraging patients to think and choose wisely in collaboration with providers. Crucially for healthcare quality improvement, such education has a role to play in providing patients with tools to help them make informed healthcare decisions, and in supporting clinicians to view their patients as part of the healthcare team.

WebMD Education applies the rigor of Medscape's customized medical education solutions to patient education, equipping both patients and providers with information, education, and tools that combine for a high-tech, high-touch approach to patient engagement. Before the clinical encounter, resources and educational activities provide patients with information about their condition, current treatment options, and specific questions to ask their provider, while provider education steers clinicians toward customized tools—for instance, to increase medication adherence—they can share with their patients during the office visit. ■

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