ACG GI Toolbox

Improving Patient Portal Engagement in Your Practice

AUTHORS:

Srinivas Kalala, MD, FACG, Waterloo, IA

Shajan Peter, MD, Hoover, AL

INTRODUCTION:

As the need for immediacy and rapid access to information continues to grow and be expected in most aspects of our society, the utilization of patient portals within a practice is becoming increasingly widespread. Patient portals are the secure online sites that give patients the opportunity to access their personal health information at any time. This enables patients to conveniently review information pertaining to their provider visits, discharge recommendations, medications, and lab and other test results. Most portals also allow patients to schedule appointments, request prescription refills, set reminders, and communicate directly with office staff. At its essence, the goal of a patient portal is to improve communication and the overall patient-experience, facilitate dialogue, and encourage active involvement by patients in their health care. This toolbox article outlines the reasons and methods to improve patient portal engagement in your clinical practice.

How important is the portal in current practice?

Improving patient engagement has been and remains a major health care reform initiative over the past several years. Public efforts in this regard included the Medicare and Medicaid Electronic Health Records (EHR) Incentive Program, or the "Meaningful Use." This is now incorporated into the Merit-based Incentive Payment System (MIPS), called "Promoting Interoperability." Other initiatives include Patient-Centered Medical Homes (PCMHs) and Accountable Care Organizations (ACOs). The patient portal serves as an important element in achieving all of these goals. Successful portal-based engagement is expected to bring the better communication, improved access, enhanced health education and shared decision-making that are valued in these incentive programs.

What are the other benefits of using the portal?

In addition to facilitating active patient involvement in their own health care and improving their overall access to their health records, the use of online portals is meant to increase efficiency, reduce out-migration, increase continuity of care, and increase referrals. Patient portals promise to improve health outcomes and reduce the overall cost of care. Clinical

practices that utilize portals optimally will reduce the costs of redundant and time-consuming telephone calls, mailing costs, automated reminder services, and automated appointment scheduling. Properly used, these systems may improve continuity of care, reduce unnecessary return office visits, and decrease no-show rates. The ability to bill online, schedule, change or cancel appointments are added benefits. These lead to overall cost efficiencies.

What are the strategies to achieve success using the portal and increasing patient engagement?

- ✓ Follow the necessary steps to successful implementation of the patient portal.
- ✓ Select a solution that offers a flexible design with continuously updated software, adequate support and a user-friendly interface.
- ✓ Promote the portal by encouraging patients to utilize it -- build and brand the portal as tailored to the patient's needs, thereby creating a culture of engagement.
- ✓ Align and engage the physician and health care teams to the needs of each patient, so they can best collaborate in managing their unique health outcomes.
- ✓ Integrate with medical billing systems.
- ✓ Develop policies and procedures for appropriate response times for answering messages from patients.
- ✓ Try allowing enrollment at registration kiosks in the office. Walk patients through the process of logging in and how to complete tasks. Both individuals and families can become active participants.
- ✓ Educate patients on what kind of communications are appropriate via the portal, how and when the providers will use the built-in messaging and build expectations on when results will be available, and a realistic timeframe to respond to correspondence. Avoid possible flooding of e- messages.
- ✓ Coordinate and get advice from federal Regional Extension Centers (REC) to plan and launch patient portal efforts.

What are the barriers to portal adoption?

It is important to note that the use of the portal can become limited by a variety of different factors. These might include: digital and internet accessibility, user knowledge and training, needs and practices of older adults, or e-health disparity. Other factors, such as security and privacy concerns, and seamless interaction with the EHR need to be considered as well. Staff training and workflows need to be developed in order to account for the appropriate time allocation required for providers to efficiently engage in the portal, avoid a flooding of messages, and even to consider proper compensation.

What are some solutions to facilitate an effective integrated patient portal?

1. Make improved patient portal engagement a priority in your practice. Prepare to devote appropriate resources to this effort.
2. Use a patient-centered design with a process that is flexible for various levels of training and education of each patient, adjusting for age, gender, socioeconomic status, etc.
3. Work on promotional initiatives to further educate on effective usage.
4. Create a workflow and train staff on all aspects of the portal, including responding to notifications, in order to reduce the overall strain on providers.
5. Work with the information technology (IT) and EHR resources to structure the portal program. It must be based on international communication standards, access control mechanisms, industry mandates for security, encryption, and HIPAA-compliance audits of information exchanged.
6. Streamline policies for data availability and timing, in-person authorization and user agreements.
7. Use a trial-period of 3 to 6 months to assess the business model and assess return on investment. Some practices will need to redefine work responsibilities of certain staff members and include appropriate adjustments to compensation.

What are the future directions?

1. Use the portal to set achievable targets and ways to measure progress. This can be disease-specific, such as monitoring patients on weight loss programs and other health goals.
2. Aim for continuous quality improvement by the addition of new features so that patients can be involved in real-time data entry. This may involve linking medical devices to measure health data, such as blood sugars and blood pressures. Future directions include monitoring chronic conditions, such as inflammatory bowel disease and liver disease through real-time reminders for medications and other recommendations.
3. Programming protocols will need to be established for the exchange of data for multiple purposes across a variety of devices with compliant software. This will empower the patient to visualize their entire health records across various platforms.
4. E-consultation with providers will require a framework of integrated technologies, a regulatory framework and adequate reimbursement to improve access to providers through the internet. Patient portal technology already provides some of this framework.

Figure 1
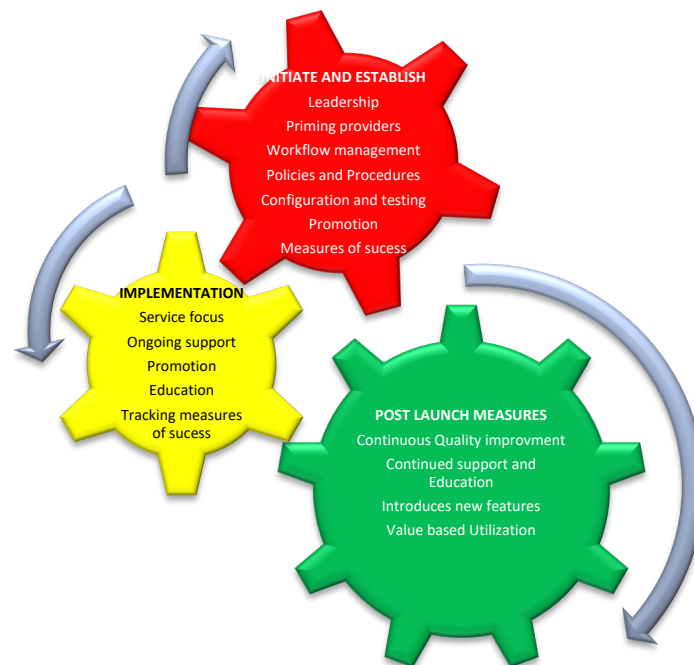
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