Bridging the Gap Between Patient Engagement Solutions, The Provider Experience

Patient engagement initiatives and technologies have become mainstays in the healthcare industry, but as more organizations begin to incorporate the patient experience into the care plan, they must at the same time stay mindful of the provider experience.

It is unsurprising that patient engagement solutions have come into the healthcare industry spotlight. As the push for value-based care has increasingly shifted the focus onto patient experience and quality outcomes, more organizations have seen the value in patient-centered care.

In May 2021, about half of healthcare CIOs reported that patient engagement technology was top priority for their organizations. Patient engagement and technology served as the biggest talking point for 52 percent of CIOs, even more so than other innovative tools like artificial intelligence and machine learning.

Digitizing patient engagement could help organizations ease some of the burden off of their already overworked providers

That's likely because of the support patient engagement technologies can give organizations in the midst of value-based care adoption, according to Dwight Raum, chief digital officer at Quil. In addition to simply being the "right thing to do," Raum said patient engagement initiatives and the tools that accompany them help organizations improve outcomes and meet their financial bottom lines.

What's more, digitizing patient engagement could help organizations ease some of the burden off of their already overworked providers. Patient engagement technologies are zeroing in on care gaps, appointment reminders, medication management, and nudging patients with information that promotes healthy behaviors to help them manage their wellness—all somewhat simple tasks that are best delegated to these patient engagement technologies.

"The upshot for a provider is that they may be able to get some of their time back," Raum explained. "As organizations leverage these tools to drive routine notifications, to prompt better compliance, that's alleviating their care team from having to do that work, that really non-value add work to what they do every single day."

In other words, Raum said digital patient engagement solutions can help providers practice at the top of their licenses.

But that's a narrow tightrope to walk, he added, cautioning that patient engagement tools and initiatives often primarily focus on the patient experience.

"The relationship between provider and patient is a two-way relationship," Raum said. "And in any kind of communication, there's a sender and a receiver. There's been a hyper focus on patient experience, and that's not inappropriate, but we have to have the same focus on provider experience."

"We have this mismatch in communication, and we're not really providing the tools for the providers to meet the expectations of the patients," he added.

By looking at how patient engagement solutions can integrate into the EHR and provider workflows and can
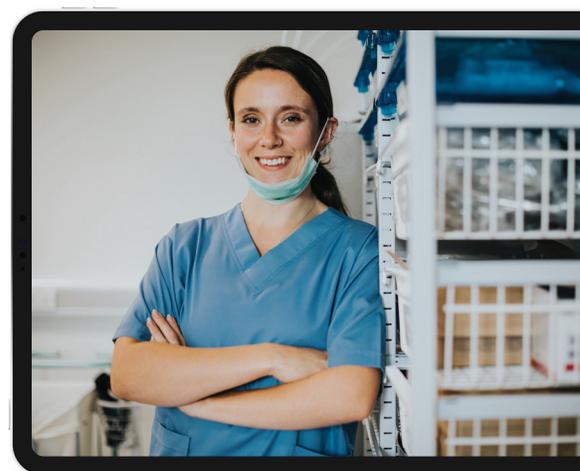
automate digital patient-provider touch-points, organizations can build a patient engagement program that also considers the provider experience. From there, those organizations can assess provider best practices, helping to streamline how clinicians integrate patient engagement systems further into their clinical practice.

Aiming for EHR integration, seamless workflows

Foremost, healthcare organizations want to ensure any new patient engagement process or program will fully integrate into the EHR. After all, it's within the EHR that so many providers begin to feel burnout or burden.

In 2019, the American Medical Association published a survey of over 5,000 physicians, with most respondents giving their EHRs an "F" grade for usability. And those low grades tended to link with higher overall provider burden, AMA added, highlighting the impact poor health IT usability has on the overall provider experience.
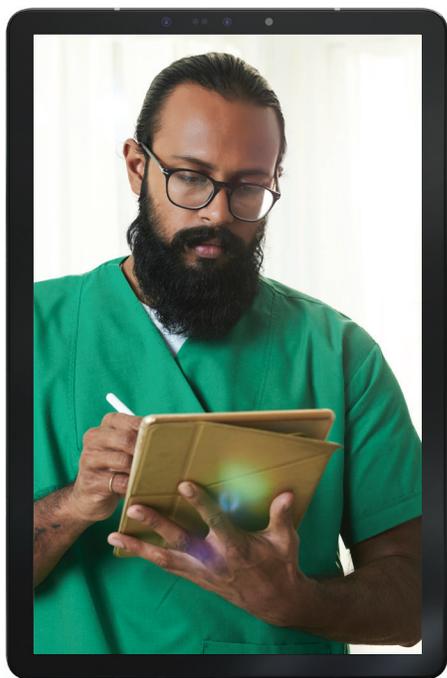
With clinicians spending their much of their shifts inside the EHR, it's essential for any new patient engagement program to integrate seamlessly, as to prevent providers from having to go "outside" the EHR to manage patient care.

"It's really important for solutions to be fully integrated into the electronic medical record," Raum stated. "Now, there are ways that you can have great integrations inside of the EMR, and there are just clumsy ways of doing it as well. A really great integration just melts into the existing workflow that they may have."

"That means having patient context directly within your application," Raum continued. "It means integrating into best practice alerts, integrating into decision support tools. It also means integrating into the existing HL7 message stream."

Healthcare organizations should be judicious about how they customize the EHR to allow for a good provider experience. Leaders can consult with individual specialty heads to assess what kind of patient information is best funneled to the top of the EHR workflow, as well as analyze provider usage data to better understand needs.

"How do you ensure that the most relevant information is driven to the top? How do you narrow the information to just what is important?" Raum posited. "There's an untapped opportunity in analyzing healthcare or EHR analytics or data around how people use the medical record to really drive and inform better engagement from providers."

Automating provider communication options

Understanding the provider experience side of patient engagement initiatives will require healthcare organizations to understand provider communication expectations and workload.

After all, when organizations boost patient engagement, there usually is the added factor of patient-provider communication. For example, studies show that patients with more access to their health data tend to have more—and better—questions for their healthcare providers. Nudging patients to access missed preventive care or screenings, for instance, or measure blood sugar at home could open the door for more patient messages.

Although more interactions could be a good thing for patient engagement, there is still the question of provider burden. Does a flooded inbox mean more work for the provider?

"We saw this with COVID," Raum offered as an anecdote. "There was a massive spike in patient communications, electronic communications to providers. And the providers have been meeting that demand, but mostly after hours trying to support their patients."

Although more interactions could be a good thing for patient engagement, there is still the question of provider burden. Does a flooded inbox mean more work for the provider?

"To the extent that tools try to leverage any kind of communication with the patients, it's important it doesn't add to that burden," Raum advised. "We ought to, as much as we can, try to build tools that automate and facilitate very quick response to patient communications and do so within the existing workflow of the electronic medical record."

Automated responses would be most appropriate for simpler patient queries, reserving time providers to practice at the top of their license and handle more complex communication.

Data analysis to measure provider experience

Like any quality improvement initiative, organizations need data to ensure new patient engagement tools allow for a positive provider experience.

"It's all in the data," Raum said. "If you don't have a program to analyze or monitor how providers are interacting with their workflow within the EMR, you need to have one."

It's from that data that healthcare organizations can determine how well a patient engagement protocol is working and how clinicians are responding. And from there, organizations can determine best practices aimed at ameliorating any latent provider burden.

"The second challenge is understanding what is best practice, and that may not become apparent for quite some time," Raum said, suggesting organizations be patient during this process.

"But as you start to establish what best practice is, it will also start to illuminate areas where there may be opportunities to improve efficiency in the workflow."

Assessing best practices likely will not remain a solo initiative for healthcare organizations, Raum added. Moving forward, there is notable room for industry-wide collaboration in this space, something he said will lead to great strides in both patient engagement and the overall provider experience.

"That's an opportunity for an organization to invest time and effort to improve that workflow," Raum stated.
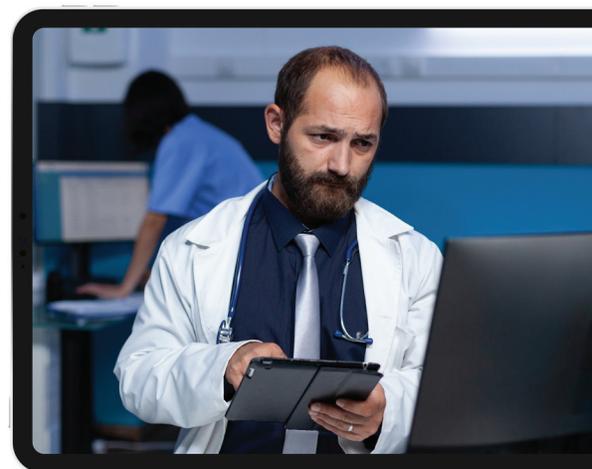
Conclusion

Healthcare is making significant progress in improving patient engagement using digital solutions. In response to the industry's shift toward value-based care, organizations have focused on patient-centered care, largely in pursuit of better outcomes that often come with financial success.

But as medical organizations continue to embrace digital patient engagement, they will have to acknowledge the other half of that equation: the provider. Like other clinical quality improvement initiatives, new patient engagement systems have the potential to alleviate provider burden. But, if not implemented judiciously, these same systems could add to clinician burden.

Healthcare organizations need to consider how a patient engagement technology would integrate into provider workflows, foremost by assessing the tool's fitness for EHR integration. Additionally, organizations should consider how a patient engagement tool automates or streamlines the patient-provider communication process, ensuring that a flooded inbox does not result in an increased workload for the clinician.

And finally, through a careful data analytics and quality measurement program, organizations should develop a system for assessing provider experience. This will allow organizations to recognize technology best practices, opening the door to support providers across the organization.

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QUIL

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