Making the Call for Patient Experience: Using Health IT to Address Gaps in Patient Data-Sharing, Communication, and Interoperability

Save to myBoK

By Kim Labow

Interoperability and integration within the health IT landscape remain high priorities for providers, patients, and technology firms. Interoperability in health IT holds the promise of more satisfied patients, providers, and health information management (HIM) professionals. But approaching an interoperability project within your organization in order to connect various health IT and electronic health record (EHR) systems can seem daunting; it must deliver benefits to all users without adding complexity to their experience.

Many practices and professionals seek answers on where and how to begin such an ambitious and potentially beneficial project. Healthcare organizations often start the interoperability journey with more questions than answers. This is to be expected in any large-scale IT project, and asking questions of one's vendor and other partners can result in a more useful, robust, and profitable implementation.

The following article outlines the challenges and opportunities providers and HIM professionals should consider when approaching an interoperability project. Some examples of the questions providers might ask when considering an interoperability project include:

- Should our organization choose discrete systems for EHR and Practice Management?
- Should we offer patients the option of accessing information in all formats, including mobile?
- What are the industry standards for security and data privacy safeguards we should adhere to?
- How can we achieve optimal interoperability without adding to complexity?

Current State of Patient Experience

Twenty-plus years of health IT investment has created mountains of data in the healthcare industry, but very few ways to navigate the information. Interoperability has been focused on making data "pipes" talk to each other rather than focusing on the data needs of the patient and provider.

But the health IT industry is now striving to advance their position, focusing on patient experience and customer satisfaction in new ways and with technology at the forefront. Consumers expect technology and the ability to interact with providers to be "always on." Advances in technology, data, and regulation have left patients with more decision-making options than ever before. A decision process that formerly consisted of personal referrals from family and friends has evolved to one of online ratings and reviews—bringing choice, transparency, and a challenge for providers to be aware of and consider participating in these new channels of patient-to-patient communications. These changes have also led consumers to expect 24/7 accessibility and self-service options: patients want to book appointments, check test results, and pay bills online or from their smartphone.

Many providers understand that offering the self-service tools to keep patients informed and satisfied is more critical than ever. Achieving interoperability between health IT systems can help address this critical need and gives providers an opportunity to improve customer experience and patient engagement while at the same time benefiting the business. Many providers are looking to realize the benefits of interoperability while not overwhelming patients or staff.

To understand some of the elements of interoperability and patient dynamics, consider one hypothetical example of a patient: a working mother and member of the so-called "sandwich generation." In a typically hectic week she might be dealing with her younger daughter, who broke her arm playing soccer and needs to see an orthopedist. Perhaps she's noticed that her elderly

father has been experiencing memory loss and needs to be evaluated by a neurologist. How can healthcare IT help her navigate and advocate without adding to her frustrations or exacerbating gaps in her experience?

The answer is to employ patient-centric solutions—from appointment setting to online forms and to easy-to-navigate payment options. But you can also go even beyond that with a mobile app that would allow her to consolidate all of her provider portals in the palm of her hand—not just for her, but for her daughter and father too. Walking into the orthopedist's office with her daughter and being able to pull up the exact date of her last tetanus shot and well-child visit won't just make the mother's life easier, it puts the patient in the center of the care continuity cycle.

The 2014 FiServ Household Billing Survey described today's bill-payers as "omnivores," who expect to be able to pay bills across multiple channels on a 24/7 basis. The hypothetical patient described above must interact with multiple physicians and practices. If one provider's website allowed her to pay her bills and schedule appointments from home in the evening, then e-mailed or texted a reminder of upcoming appointments—all without requiring multiple logins—that provider would likely find a more satisfied and loyal patient.

To deliver a satisfying customer experience, IT infrastructure and patient technologies have to facilitate access to personal information, capture patient selections, and deliver them back into the practice in a way that doesn't confuse or overburden staff members.

The Patient is the Path Forward

It's critical to empower HIM professionals to deliver transformative technology that puts every patient in control of his or her healthcare and enables providers to thrive. HIM staff have the critical task of keeping patients' and practices' best interests in mind, and deploying technology solutions can be a key bridge between those audiences. By enabling self-service tasks safely and securely, patients can become more engaged and loyal—and staff will have the added benefit of more time to focus on higher-value activities.

Given all the changes in the healthcare IT landscape and the challenges of delivering consistent, efficient customer service, here are some recommendations to begin thinking through interoperability and integration of IT systems and tools.

Understand the Patient Experience

Observe how patients currently interact with the practice—or don't interact. Evaluate all processes and understand how patients navigate them: contact the practice by phone and online; try to complete a typical series of tasks. Note which tasks go well and which ones seem more difficult. Can this experience help pinpoint any challenges that could be solved by interoperability between IT systems? Make sure you go through an entire patient interaction—from scheduling their appointment to paying their balance. And don't just consider what happens within your four walls—what do patients do on-the-go or from home?

Understand IT Interoperability is the Solution to Some Challenges (But Not All)

Think about the big picture, then identify the steps to get there. The big picture might include the ability to process secure credit card transactions online along with secure messaging. But on the way to realizing that vision, are there "offline" things that can be done to improve the patient experience? Providers can often achieve positive results with offline changes, such as revising the wording of appointment reminders to help reduce staff hours spent chasing down address changes and updated credit card numbers.

Consider the Current State of the Market as an Opportunity, Not an Obstacle

Healthcare IT is more important than ever. Patients want 24/7 access to information and online bill payment, whether they're using the family laptop in their kitchen or their smartphone during halftime at their child's basketball game. If a healthcare organization doesn't offer such options in an easy-to-consume format, they may feel unable to compete effectively. Don't take no for an answer—and don't assume a standalone solution will be the quickest to implement.

Time is Money

This phrase seems more relevant than ever for HIM professionals, physicians, and patients. What steps can smart providers take towards efficiency after evaluating patient experience data? For example, a practice implementing a patient portal that allows automated password reminders and change requests frees up office staff from having to manually troubleshoot lost or forgotten passwords. We've seen innovative customers succeed with new ideas like reformatting their billing statements in response to customer feedback. Such technology implementations require an initial investment of time and effort but save time, reduce frustration, and increase revenue over time.

Meet the Patient Where He or She Requires

A functional and informational website that's up-to-date, an intuitive-to-use voicemail system, satisfying in-person visits, and a mobile app connecting patients with their data on the go can combine to offer a holistic and satisfying customer experience. But if those tools are implemented improperly or don't integrate seamlessly, there's a risk of not only dissatisfying the patient but creating an environment that could increase the likelihood of an error. Providers should ask themselves if their practice is adequately staffed and trained to properly support and maintain a technology or tool. Practices must understand their patients and trusted technology partners, heed the counsel of their office staff, and embrace the solution that delivers the optimal experience for all constituents.

Consumer Experience Improvement is a Continuous Journey

Health IT will always be a work-in-progress. But improving the patient experience benefits everyone, and in this always-on world of savvy consumers, one great customer experience can have a ripple effect far beyond the practice walls.

Kim Labow (kim.labow@medfusion.com) is CEO of Medfusion.

Article citation:
Labow, Kim. "Making the Call for Patient Experience: Using Health IT to Address Gaps in Patient Data-Sharing, Communication, and Interoperability" *Journal of AHIMA* 87, no.8 (August 2016): 20-22.