Outlining Your Health Information Strategy: Tips for Providing Quality Patient Service

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by Jill Callahan Dennis, JD, RHIA

What's your organization's health information strategy? Having spent the last few months experiencing the healthcare system from the standpoint of a patient's spouse, I would suggest the following patient-centered actions.

Create patient-friendly processes to authorize the release of information. HIM professionals work with and design authorization forms to meet a variety of needs, including compliance with HIPAA, state laws, and other regulations. But even within a single legal jurisdiction, forms vary widely and are often confusing for patients. My husband recently struggled to complete an authorization form, then turned the form over to me and asked "What's an H&P?" You and I understand healthcare jargon, but we sometimes forget that not all patients do. Given that the primary user of any authorization form is the patient, shouldn't authorizations be written with the patient in mind?

Rapidly disseminate key information to patients and their designees. Most providers work hard to share patient information in a timely manner. But what's timely and reasonable in the normal flow of our work is often not as timely as it should be from the patient's point of view. Are there some test results that warrant expedited communication (e.g., pathology reports where malignancy is suspected)? Even within the same organization, practices often vary, and these variances cause countless hours of worry for patients.

Eliminate unnecessarily duplicative data collection. HIM professionals know full well how many data elements are duplicated within a patient's record. Some of this duplication serves a purpose (e.g., multiple questions about the correct operative site serve a valid patient safety goal). But where no such goal is served, this duplication is a potential source of errors and wastes countless hours for healthcare providers and patients.

Eliminate obstacles for information sharing with patients. During a recent hospitalization, my husband took the bold step of asking to see his health information. How are these requests handled in your organization? In this instance, my husband was provided with a blank authorization form, told he probably couldn't see the information until after he was discharged, and instructed to take the form down to the HIM department when he was discharged. The staff was professional and courteous, but ultimately it was a missed opportunity to answer his questions.

Promptly handle requests for the release of information. When my husband sought a second opinion at a Michigan health system before surgery, the HIM staff, upon request, faxed us a blank authorization form, which we returned the same day. Within 12 hours, one of the reports we requested had been faxed to us, with a note that it was all they had. Before another day had passed, the second transcribed report was faxed to us. Someone in that department had apparently watched for the missing report to come through and followed up on our request without prompting or a second request. Given the importance of that information to our decision-making process for surgery, that HIM professional made an important contribution to our peace of mind and our ability to make an informed decision.

What's Your Strategy?

When you examine the health information processes at your organization, can you say that they are patient-centered? Many of us are in the throes of converting traditional, paper-based processes to e-HIM® processes. As we do that, are we keeping patients' needs in mind?

Jill Callahan Dennis *(jdennis@healthriskadvantage.com) is principal at Health Risk Advantage in Parker, CO.*

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