

Streamlining Patient and Physician Communication: IT Systems and Internet Offer Paths for Effective Communication for Patient Care

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By Diana Warner, MS, RHIA, CHPS

Many organizations still struggle with ongoing and timely clinical communication among physicians and between physicians and their patients. Physician-to-physician communication for ongoing patient care is especially complex. It requires identifying all physicians involved in the care of a patient at each encounter and ensuring that the patient's health information is communicated to each physician. Routine communication to patients also presents challenges if an organization hasn't implemented a well-designed process to relay test results, questions, and follow-up.

Lack of clinical communication leaves gaps in patient care and may even create patient safety concerns if pertinent information about the patient, such as abnormal lab results, is not communicated in a timely manner.

However, organizations can take advantage of IT systems and the Internet, which offer new ways for physicians to effectively communicate with each other and with patients in a reasonable timeframe.

Communication Methods

Physician-to-physician communication occurs in a variety of methods. Physicians typically communicate with each other by mailing or faxing copies of discharge summaries or patient visit notes.

Physicians who work in the same healthcare system often have access to the same patient health information available for review. Occasionally, they will call each other or even page one another to discuss patient care.

The current method of receiving health information is inconsistent, says Walter C. Dandridge, JR, MD, MBA, senior vice president of medical affairs and chief medical officer at St. John's Regional Medical Center in Joplin, MO. In many organizations, it is often up to the physician caring for the patient to indicate who will receive a copy of the patient's health information. In order to determine who is copied, physicians may ask the patient or review past documentation to try to determine all the physicians involved with the patient's care, he says.

This workflow is inefficient because it is up to the physician to remember to communicate with all the patient's providers. This manual process leads to inconsistent communication that may create gaps in coordinating care.

The physician is also responsible for communicating directly with patients. Physician-to-patient communication may occur by mailing copies of test results or a phone call if the results are critical or need immediate follow-up. Patients may communicate with their physicians through letters, e-mail, phone calls, or unscheduled office visits.

Organizations must implement workflows for these processes in order to ensure timely communication with patients; otherwise, they may be missed.

These varying methods of sharing patient health information may increase patient safety risks when medications are updated or abnormal results are not reported. They may also result in a lack of understanding about diagnosis, work-up, and treatment.

Advances in Technology

Electronic systems and the Internet both provide easier and faster ways to communicate patient health information. Organizations that use this technology can expect more timely communication between physicians and patients.

The principal benefits of electronic communication come from its ease of use. However, workflow processes must be designed to ensure clinical communication is received in a timely manner.

To expedite communication to referring and primary care physicians, some organizations have implemented electronic processes to ensure copies of health records are automatically faxed or printed to be mailed. Some organizations capture the list of the patient's physicians upon registration. The list is then tied to each patient encounter. When the health information is completed, copies are automatically sent to the patient's list of physicians.

Some physicians within an organization communicate electronically. Jon Hallberg, MD, assistant professor of family medicine and community health and medical director at the Mill City Clinic at the University of Minnesota Physicians, uses an electronic health record to query other physicians within his organization. Physicians are notified they have a task and may reply through the system.

This has eliminated telephone tag and pages. It also provides an overall quicker response. Hallberg relies on these tasks to notify him when new health information is available on his patients from other physicians in the organization.

Timely communication with patients is just as important. Designing workflows to allow physicians to easily communicate with their patients is essential. Physicians continue to use the phone to contact patients with critical test results or if immediate follow-up is needed. However, notifying patients of their routine test results is not always done consistently.

At the Mill City Clinic, Hallberg is able to annotate or add notes directly to test results and then send a copy to the patient. He says that the timely notification with explanation of the results mailed to patients has reduced the number of patient calls.

A growing number of patients are expressing interest in communicating directly online with their physicians through e-mail or Web sites. Online communication offers patients more involvement in and control over their care. Patient communications varies from administrative requests such as patient appointments and billing questions to clinical requests such as test results and prescriptions.

According to Hallberg, allowing patients to report on their health issues such as blood pressure or blood sugar readings is very empowering. However, Dandridge expressed physician reservations with adopting online communication practices. He cited concerns with reimbursement and potential increased workload as examples of the barriers physicians face.

Ensuring proper workflow such as designating a team to review electronic patient communication will ease the burden on physicians. Policies that outline accepted procedures and staff responsibilities will further ensure timely responses.

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Diana Warner (diana.warner@ahima.org) is a manager of professional practice resources at AHIMA.

Article citation:

Warner, Diana. "Streamlining Patient and Physician Communication: IT Systems and Internet Offer Paths for Effective Communication for Patient Care" *Journal of AHIMA* 81, no.11 (November 2010): 50-51.

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