Modernizing Digital Patient Education Strategies

Optimal Education and Engagement
Starts with Ambulatory Care

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As physician practices toil to improve their operations and care outcomes, many struggle to find patient education materials that clinicians can trust, and that patients can easily understand. With only 31% of clinicians completely satisfied with their organization's materials,[1] many have been forced to create their own solutions.

Explains one primary care physician: "I keep yogurt cups in my desk drawer to teach diabetic patients how to read food labels."

Sharing condition-specific education is a significant aspect of effective patient care. In fact, 30% of health is shaped by behavior and just 20% by clinical care,[2] making it crucial for patients and their families to understand the education provided so they can manage complex health issues at home.

However, several barriers hinder the education process, including the amount of time clinicians can spend with their patients; when information is provided; and how much of it is actually understood, retained, and acted on by patients and their caregivers.

Even in today's healthcare environment, given the brief nature of the typical patient visit, processes beyond the clinicians' control can determine when education is provided – often at a time when the patient may not be ready to absorb or act on it. This predicament is especially prevalent in the ambulatory care setting (e.g., primary care, specialty, and urgent care clinics), where approximately 95% of care is provided.[3]

In fact, according to the Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality, 50% of patients leave their provider visits without a clear understanding of self-management responsibilities. Nor can patients or their caregivers recall 40-80% of the information shared by their healthcare providers.[4]

Only **31%** of clinicians are **"completely satisfied with their organization's patient education tools"**

Improving well-documented health literacy struggles is a national priority over the next decade. Defined by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention as "the degree to which individuals have the ability to find, understand, and use information and services to inform health-related decisions and actions for themselves,"[5] health literacy should also be a top priority for any patient education strategy. This is particularly true in the ambulatory care setting, where limited resources often send patients online in a futile search for answers to their health questions. In fact, one recent study found that while approximately 68% of adults in the U.S. use electronic means to seek health information, nearly 62% are frustrated by their efforts.[6]

This problem is likely to be exacerbated as new care models evolve beyond face-to-face care and into telemedicine and virtual visits, and the focus on health promotion and chronic disease management intensifies.

> **"We do what we can for our patients to help them live their best lives, but it's not enough."**
>
> – Primary care physician, large health system, 2021 Elsevier Physician Survey

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Adapting to Change

Care teams can address this problem with effective patient education. This requires clear, concise explanations without the use of medical jargon, an understanding of patient priorities, goal setting and establishing an effective teach-back process – all of which must be reinforced with education resources for patients when they are prepared to engage.

Evolving care models – and their impact on patients' information needs – have shone a spotlight on how digital, multimedia education can support effective communication to positively influence healthy behavior.

Further, while much focus has been on patient education within the acute care setting, we can make a strong case that the expanding ambulatory setting, where innovation and technology play key roles, should drive efforts to modernize the patient education and engagement experience. Patient education is an important clinical intervention in ambulatory medicine and most effective with a coordinated organizational strategy in place.

As such, care teams should work together to ensure the patient education experience is aligned across the continuum of care, yet still tailored to individual experiences.

Meeting Patient Expectations

Among clinicians, key considerations for multimedia education include consistency and availability across the care continuum, and a view of patient consumption history. For their part, patients expect access to reliable information from their care team and guidance on additional resources available outside the health system.

Nor is it enough to simply hand patients a brochure or point them to a website – not given the ubiquitous nature of smart devices and electronic communications. In fact, the majority of Americans (85%) own a smartphone and about half own a tablet [7] – tools that are used by almost all to access websites and apps.[8] What's more, 81% of Americans text regularly, sending more than 6 billion texts every day.[9]

This reliance on mobile devices and preference for electronic communication extends to health information. Today's patients expect current, trustworthy, personalized information that answers their specific questions. Convenience and modality are also important, for example, offering patients a choice of print, SMS text message, QR codes, emails and/or electronic health record (EHR) patient portals.

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Personalized education experiences:

- Communicate effectively
  - Align with health literacy principles
  - Address learning preference, language, reading levels
  - Incorporate diversity and inclusion principles
- Use evidence-based content
- Optimize to the patient's device(s)
  - Print, QR code, SMS text, email, EHR portal
- Produce actionable and meaningful insights for individual health needs

Patients also want the ability to search trusted education resources specific to their needs. The ability to do a deeper dive through a library of evidence-based content supports patients' confidence in their clinicians, understanding of their conditions and engagement in their own care.

Finally, it is important to note that patients hold healthcare to the same standards as other aspects of their lives. Among consumers who indicated high interest in personalizing the digital experience, 87% ranked personalized healthcare products and services the highest – ahead of even retail. [10]
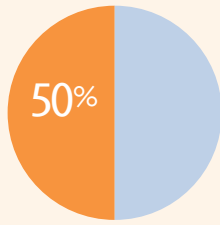
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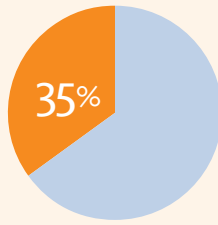
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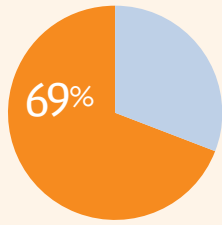
Effective patient education strategies

Successful digital patient education and engagement strategies require a coordinated effort between ambulatory and acute care providers, and efficient processes to support access to relevant resources. The patient's consumption and understanding of the education materials should also be monitored, which enables more meaningful clinician-patient conversations.

Integrating the patient education platform into the clinical workflow via the EHR is an effective way to provide streamlined access to digital patient education resources across all care settings at the opportune time for both clinician and patient.

This also allows the care team to consistently help patients understand their conditions and take the right steps to leading a healthier life. Care teams across all settings can tailor their approach by building on the patient's base knowledge about their condition to enrich their understanding and encourage action.

Finally, incorporating data and analytics into the patient education platform allows a deeper understanding of its impact on individuals and across patient populations. These insights are crucial to identifying where adjustments are needed to ensure the program's overall success.

Prioritizing Patient Education

As healthcare continues to shift toward lower cost care settings, ambulatory care providers will benefit their patients by offering access to the educational resources – when, where and how they need them – to understand their conditions and engage proactively in their care.

In summary, a successful patient education and engagement strategy is one that is coordinated across the care continuum and aligns with the patient's specific health needs. It should be built around an agile platform that integrates into the EHR workflow and supports both ambulatory and acute care teams. Finally, it should deliver to the clinical team the data and analytics that paint a true portrait of a patient's understanding and utilization of the information.

Ultimately, we find that by ensuring ambulatory care providers are properly equipped with patient education resources that have been prioritized as a powerful clinical intervention tool – and by coordinating patient education strategies with the acute care side of the house – clinical support can extend beyond the brick-and-mortar facility into the patient's community and home. When this happens, the result is a modernized approach to education that meets the needs, expectations and high standards of both patients and providers across the care continuum.

> **Unifying patient education across the health system through a "single source" platform was identified as one of the best strategies for improving patient education.**
>
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