STREAMLINE HEALTHCARE OPERATIONS BY AUTOMATING COMMUNICATION TOOLS
It’s hard to imagine an industry that can be more negatively affected by communication problems than the healthcare industry.

“It has been long known that communications affects patient safety,” wrote Dr. Joseph Laver, the chief medical officer at Stony Brook University Hospital in Stony Brook, N.Y., in a blog on the hospital website titled “Improving Patient Satisfaction Through Communication.” “Research evidence shows there is a strong relationship between a healthcare provider’s communication skills and a patient’s ability to follow through with recommendations, manage a chronic condition and adopt preventive behaviors.”

The communication problems in the healthcare industry go beyond doctors’ and nurses’ inability to communicate effectively. A large part of the problem is due to the lack of effective automated communications tools. For example, the communication problems between hospitals and the doctors of patients who have been hospitalized is so bad that a large number of patients are unnecessarily readmitted to the hospital, according to a report by Vanderbilt (Tenn.) University titled “Study to explore new technologies to connect doctors, patients outside medical settings.”

Altogether, about 20 percent of hospital patients are readmitted to a hospital within 30 days. That’s partly because the discharge summary that hospitals send to patients’ doctors are sent via mail rather than via automated records reports a University of Buffalo article titled “Tearing down the barriers to care transitions.” Doctors typically don’t receive a discharge summary for 10 to 14 days. Automated records could be sent to the doctors within hours. The delay means that doctors are often unable to prescribe the right medicine or treatment to their patients, and people with chronic illnesses like high blood pressure and diabetes have to re-enter the hospital.

The Vanderbilt report also says that written discharge summaries often don’t include crucial information. Automated reports can also be missing information, but doctors can get the missing information more easily. The bottom line is that automated communication between hospital and doctors benefits patients and doctors. Patients spend more time at home and less time at hospitals, reduce their medical expenses, and are healthier because they are treated before their physical condition requires another hospital visit. Doctors are able to treat patients more effectively and can save considerable money on administrative costs.

Similarly, automated communication between patients and doctors can also help patients and doctors. On the surface, it might not be logical that there is a correlation between better patient outcomes and providing more opportunities for patients to leave and receive messages, other than

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**Streamline Healthcare Operations by Automating Communication Tools**

PhoneTree
receiving appointment reminders. However, patient satisfaction can play a big role in patients getting better medical care, according to the Stony Brook and Vanderbilt reports.

“Every segment in health care — payers, health systems, physicians or pharmaceutical companies — recognizes that the health care process must be streamlined and expedited in a way that is patient-friendly, similar to the way consumers easily buy books online from Amazon,” Tom Barker, the chief executive officer of West Corporation, an Omaha, Neb.-based communications company, told Vanderbilt.

Medical Offices Have Lagged Technologically

Given the importance of effective communication in the healthcare industry and the effectiveness of automated communication, you would think that the healthcare industry would have historically been in the forefront of technological solutions to communications problems.

Unfortunately, the logical conclusion is wrong. “Healthcare, one of the final frontiers when it comes to making the shift from a paper-based communication system to one that is digital, has been slow to adopt emerging technologies,” reported “The Art of Medicine in a digital world,” a research paper by Becker’s Healthcare, which describes itself as “the leading source of cutting-edge business and legal information for healthcare industry leaders.” “Part of the reason for this is the complexity of the entire healthcare system at hand, and the risk involved in such change—people’s lives.”

A 2004 report by the University of Michigan titled “The Emerging Role of Online Communication Between Patients and Their Providers” makes it crystal clear how far behind the healthcare industry was in implementing automated communication systems. The report says that communication between doctors and patients “remains largely based on visits and phone” although web-based interactions are often more efficient and automated documentation of these communications “eliminates a time-consuming and inefficient component of workflow that would be welcomed by staff and clinicians.”

In recent years though, the healthcare industry has become more efficient as it realized that it could use the successful automated processes of other industries. An article in the UB Reporter reported that the UB Center of Excellence for Global Enterprise Management showed doctors how they could attain “major improvements in efficiency, cost savings and patient care” when they utilize the technology that manufacturers use. The technology pinpoints bottlenecks and identifies solutions. For example, it figured out that patient-only elevators at hospitals improved service to patients.

Children’s Medical Center Dallas and Nemours Children’s Hospital in Orlando also improved their efficiency and effectiveness by using automated communication tools that were first used by other industries. The Orlando hospital, for example, uses a licensed paramedic who remotely monitors patients. The automated system reduced the amount of time it took to respond to patients who needed emergency help or didn’t take their medication, reported Children’s Hospitals Today in the article “Mission: Control.” “Using ideas from industries like aviation, nuclear power and the military, hospitals can improve safety and communication,” the article reported.
The number of ways for patients to communicate with medical professionals, hospitals, and offices is increasing. The article “8 Ways to Use Online Patient Communication Tools to Improve Practice Efficiency and Effectiveness,” which is geared more toward doctors with private practices and their staffs, lists eight ways that communication tools are used to streamline operations at doctors’ offices.

The article says that doctors and patients via automation can communicate online for:

- Appointment Reminders & Communications
- Collection Calls
- Payment Processing
- Health History Forms
- Patient Feedback
- Newsletters and Greetings
- Daily Schedules
- Online Patient Referrals

Today, automation, including automated communication tools, is essential for streamlining operations at hospitals and in doctor’s offices. The 2015 article “7 Processes You Need to Automate In A Hospital” identifies the seven processes as admission procedures, emergency room operations, transfers to other hospitals, medication processes, medical documentation, supply of drugs, and patient flow. Failure to automate equals delays in treating patients and less patient satisfaction. Automating communication across departments can alleviate these problems, the article reports.
Let’s take a look at how some of the above tasks can be performed better thanks to digital communication tools.

**Automated Reminders:**

An automated appointment reminder system can be invaluable so office managers and others are not tying up the phone lines on routine calls. It helps the patients you’re phoning, and the prospective patients who are trying to reach you. The article “Patient reminder communications: An online approach” reports that the right software can make communicating with patients extremely easy. “All the office staff has to do is enter the (patient’s) e-mail address into the e-mail field in the practice management software,” the article says. “The software then reads the appointment dates and automatically sends the appropriate communications to the patient.”

What’s the “appropriate communications?” Ask the patients. Some patients prefer e-mails. Some prefer text messages. Some prefer phone messages. The best practice is to give them a choice of delivery method.

How to structure and send your message is also part of determining what is appropriate. An automated reminder system can be programmed to send reminders to patients at specific times such as one or two weeks before the appointment. It is a best practice to include a “confirm” or “need to reschedule” option in the reminder message. This can be implemented across email, phone or text messages, and has led to some medical offices reducing their number of staff-answered confirmation calls by up to 35 percent.

**Automated Surveys:**

Asking patients to fill out survey forms as they leave your office can be awkward -- and they want to leave a doctor’s office ASAP. Sending the survey via an automated e-mail puts less pressure on patients to fill out the form ASAP and increases the valuable info you will receive because they will be filling out the survey at a time that is convenient to them.

The “Patient reminder communications” article reports that automated online surveys can help medical offices address any problems with their services more expeditiously. That’s because automated software can send alerts to medical offices about low scores instantly. “Patients who have issues resolved promptly develop greater loyalty and are even more likely to refer others than those who experience initial satisfaction,” the article reports.
An Automated Patient Referral System:

Costs aside, most medical offices prefer an automated patient referral system because doctors just don’t like asking for referrals. Setting up a system that allows patients to send information about your practice to a friend has become very easy in recent years. “The patient just sends a link from the online communication Web site to his or her friends and family, thus generating the referral without the doctor’s or staff’s intervention, as if they were handing out your business card online,” the “Patient reminder communications” article reports.

Modern automated software tracks the people who referred a medical office to a friend or family member and the revenue the referral generates. It can also send a thank you note to the referrer. This can encourage more referrals.

The following tasks can also be performed better thanks to automated communication tools:

* **Automated collection calls:** Do you really want people in your office to have a testy relationship with patients? Of course you don’t. Collecting payments via automation is preferable to a personal phone call -- and is much more efficient.

* **Automated newsletters:** How are you going to communicate information such as news about free blood pressure screenings at local events? Using the e-mail system to automatically send these news reports can make patients, and prospective patients, more satisfied with your services.

* **Automated birthday greetings:** Do people appreciate doctors sending them birthday greetings? Some don’t. Some do. In either case, it’s a great way to remind patients to see a doctor.

The New Solutions Have Attained Results

What should medical offices do to inform patients about automated tools and promote their use? The answer is to let the patients themselves decide. Communication experts will tell you how important listening is, and that principle works even when two people are communicating via automation.

The “8 Ways” article emphasized that 98 percent of dentists surveyed say patients should choose how dentists’ offices communicate with them. Thus, offices should set up a variety of ways to remind patients of appointments and bill due dates. Methods include automated voice messages, e-mail and text.
These practices have been successfully implemented in dentists’ offices. The “8 Ways” article reports that 32 percent of patients make an online payment within one day of receiving an automated reminder that they owe the dentist money, and 50 percent make the payment within two days. “Sending an automated reminder about a past due payment is more effective, reduces accounts receivable, and promotes a positive practice-patient relationship,” the article says. “Not only that, 66% of members surveyed stated that on average, patients pay online faster than those who pay via check. 33% say they pay a week faster or more.”

The article “MetroHealth Medical Center to start texting appointment reminders this spring” should be a reminder to all medical offices that different people are more reachable by different communication approaches. The Cleveland medical center -- and many other medical centers around the nation -- have learned in recent years that low-income patients and young patients are more likely to use mobile phones than other patients. Thus, the Cleveland facility in 2013 began sending text messages to reduce appointment no-shows.

"MetroHealth believes that texting reminders will reach more patients than traditional phone calls, e-mail or postcards,” the article reports. “A similar program the health system implemented for teens who were behind on immunizations improved vaccination rates by 15 percent this winter...The text reminders will go out to all patients who have a text-enabled mobile phone.”

A study conducted by the American Academy of Pediatrics also showed that automated reminder phone calls will help medical offices when they are part of a letter/phone call plan.

Similarly, a study conducted by the American Academy of Pediatrics showed that a reminder program consisting of a letter followed by two autodialer phone calls and a second letter significantly increased the percentage of adolescents who received needed immunizations, according to the article “Effectiveness and Net Cost of Reminder/Recall for Adolescent Immunizations.” The percentage of adolescents who received at least one immunization increased from 34.6 percent to 47.1 percent and the percentage who received all of them increased from 25.2 to 36.2 percent when they received the letters and phone calls.

In addition, 76 percent of dentists surveyed reported that automated reminders reduced the amount of time spent on administrative work. A whitepaper titled “Reducing No-Shows & Cancellations” detailed the benefits of a “multi-channel reminder program” that involves offices giving each patient “the tool that works best for them.” The whitepaper also details the financial benefits of an automated reminder program. An automated reminder system costs roughly $2,500 per year while a manual system making
20, 30, 50, and 100 calls respectively costs $4,000, $6,000, $10,000, and $20,000 respectively.

A study by The Annals of Family Medicine (AFM) concluded that about two-thirds of patients who no-show an appointment felt the “negative emotions about going to the clinic were greater than the perceived benefit of keeping the appointment.” Consequently, communicating the benefits of seeing a doctor are crucial. It’s more efficient to communicate these benefits via automated communication tools.

“The AFM study demonstrates that you must clearly communicate how important it is to keep each appointment,” the whitepaper says.

Other Communication Solutions

Reports by Becker’s Healthcare include other solutions that could improve the communication between patients and their doctors. They include:

Recording Conversations:

“The Art of Medicine” report recommends an automated system of documenting what patients say to doctors using software that translates the patients’ verbal words into a written record. Then doctors can concentrate on helping patients immediately, rather than spending so much time writing what the patients told them. The digital record can be accessed by that doctor or another doctor more easily than written records during future office or hospital visits.

Transferring Patient Info:

Do you have a new patient that previously had another doctor? Does another doctor want to know more information about one of your current or previous patients? The doctor-patient communication process is often too time consuming because patients have to re-explain their problems. Your office doesn’t even have to ask if you have what Becker’s Healthcare calls patient handoff communication tools. The Becker’s article “10 patient handoff communications tools” lists them. They include downloadable information from the Royal College of Physicians, the Morehouse School of Medicine, and the American Association of Critical-Care Nurses.

Other solutions include:

* The UC San Diego Health System has a patient-physician communication system that is linked to an electronic medical record system. It makes communication about medications, payments of bills, results of medical exams, and scheduling of appointments easier.

* The American College of Physicians’ Center for Practice Improvement & Innovation has a
“Communicating with Patients Electronically” report that includes a wide variety of recommendations, including automated patient education programs. It also mentions that some medical offices have automated systems for notifying patients about “normal” lab results.

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