BETTERING POPULATION HEALTH BY IMPROVING THE PATIENT EXPERIENCE
The Triple Aim Solution

In 2007 the Institute for Healthcare Improvement (IHI) launched an innovative three-pronged approach that would better the health of populations while reducing health care costs. This approach, called the Triple Aim, focuses on three goals: improving the patient experience of care (including quality and satisfaction), improving the health of populations, and reducing per capita cost of health care.

Traditionally, providers focused on acute or specialized care instead of primary and preventive care. Through the Triple Aim approach, practices shift their focus from individual patient care to caring for populations of patients.

At its core, the Triple Aim framework is an approach to optimize the performance of health systems. This is especially significant, considering that the United States has the most costly health care system in the world. According to the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services, U.S. health care system costs account for 17% of the gross domestic product and are estimated to increase to 20% by 2020. Meanwhile, new challenges worldwide include aging populations and chronic health issues, which are adding demands on health services.

Understanding the Triple Aim Approach

“For the health of our communities, for the health of our school systems, and for the health of all of our patients, we need to address all three of the Triple Aim dimensions at the same time.”

—IHI

According to the Institute for Healthcare Improvement, the three aims should be incorporated together, as each component is not independent from the others. Pursuing one approach can affect the others either positively or negatively. For example, a provider may increase care quality, but with overwhelming costs.

The Institute for Healthcare Improvement recognizes most health care settings today don’t have the capacity for accountability in all three areas of the Triple Aim. Keeping
in mind that the goals of the Triple Aim are interdependent, providers can begin by looking more closely at how their practices can improve the patient experience in particular, without incurring significant new costs or human resources.

Because each aim affects the others, providers will be able to see how the pursuit of a better patient experience can come alongside healthier populations and reduced costs.

**Improving the Patient Experience**

Patients expect to receive excellent care when visiting their health care providers. A better patient experience leads to improved patient satisfaction, patients who are more likely to adhere to provider recommendations, and better patient health outcomes.

Some ways small to mid-sized practices can create more coordinated patient care include joining physician associations to increase access to resources, like electronic health record systems, or becoming certified as a Patient-Centered Medical Home (PCMH).

However, one critical way to create an improved patient experience is through better patient-provider communication. While larger health systems may have more resources at their disposal, like robust IT departments and community outreach professionals, small practices can achieve strong patient-provider communication—even with more limited resources. The key is using the right communication tools:

**Patient Portals**

Patient portals not only aid in improved patient-provider communication, but also better access to care. As more patients are becoming tech savvy regardless of age (though it is helpful to consult with each patient on how they prefer to be contacted), 24/7 online patient portals allow for secure messaging, viewing of lab results, online payment, and appointment scheduling. Through patient portals, patients become actively engaged in their care. The online coordination also maximizes communication while decreasing the burden on staff.

Note: Patients should still be debriefed when introduced to the patient portal and should be able to easily follow up with staff if they have questions while engaging with the portal.
Mobile Applications
Mobile health applications range from wireless glucose monitors to calorie counters designed to help users become healthier. Such technology, if used correctly by patients, can provide useful information to physicians, especially when helping a patient manage chronic disease. Mobile health apps not only actively engage patients in their health, but also provide data to physicians where patient health improvements or setbacks can be tracked.

Telemedicine
Telemedicine initiatives can provide care from physicians via secure video. Telemedicine is often used as a community outreach measure in smaller rural communities, where distance to the practice and transportation issues make it difficult for patients to be seen in-office. Having access to a physician via telemedicine can decrease emergency department visits and can provide a way to access continuous primary care.

Patient Care Cards
A patient care card is one way to keep new patients in the loop about their new provider and recent visit. Patient care cards are like business cards, but often include the physician's headshot. Patient care cards are further personalized with a clear number to call regarding medical questions and room for written notes about tests orders, diagnoses, or follow-up. This way, patients have information from their visit in-hand when they leave the office and know exactly who to follow up with if needed.

Email or Snail Mail
Secure email is another tool to improve patient-provider communication. Emails can be used to follow up with patients regarding their recent visit, provide information on instructions for their next visit, send useful patient health information, or simply remind a patient of an upcoming appointment. The exact same information can be provided in print versions, via snail mail, for patients who don’t feel comfortable sharing their information online or aren’t tech savvy.
SMS/Text Messaging
Text messages should not include private patient information, but can be handy communication tools to remind patients of appointments and increase patient appointment adherence. The short and convenient delivery of a text message makes it a prime reminder tool, especially considering the major reason for not attending an appointment is simply patients forgetting they were scheduled. The text message should provide a phone number/contact in case the patient needs to reschedule. A no-show patient means more time rescheduling and longer wait times for other patients who are interested in an appointment, resulting in lower patient satisfaction.

Phone Calls/Automated Phone Calls
Phone calls and automated phone calls are another way to share appointment reminders or necessary follow-up with patients. Conversely, should a patient need to contact their provider via phone, it is helpful to ask: how easy is it for them to get in contact with the person they need to speak to? Long automated introductions or hold times can deter patients from accessing provider information that they need via telephone.

Using such communication tools to improve the patient experience results in improved workflow, reduced costs, and stronger coordination between patient and provider regarding appointments, diagnoses, and necessary follow-up. When providers can communicate more frequently, meaningfully, and efficiently, patients are more confident in their health knowledge and feel empowered to reach out with questions.

A better patient-provider relationship ultimately results in improving the patient experience of care. Keeping the Triple Aim approach in mind, it is possible to implement communication tools without incurring significant costs. Meanwhile, improved communication to better the patient experience can also help to achieve improved population health.

Want to explore communication tools to improve patient experience with your organization?

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SOURCES

http://www.aha.org/content/15/brief-3aim.pdf. 29 April, 2015.


