Pharmacy Automation and Technology

Consider Creating a Channel Management Strategy With Both Colleagues and Patients

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Patient engagement is poised to provide considerable opportunities for reaching patients. The range of connectivity options should be considered to include the best option for each specific patient. In this article, we address this area of growing importance, telecommunication channel management.

You probably already know the best way to connect to the people in your life using information technology. Do the following scenarios sound familiar? You know your spouse usually can't get to a mobile phone before it rolls over to voicemail, so you text him or her with a message. You have a colleague who answers e-mails within minutes of them hitting his inbox, yet he does not answer calls to his mobile phone. You know somebody who uses her voicemail like a screening instrument, so you may as well walk to her desk for a face-to-face consult. What we are describing is telecommunication channel management.

We suggest that you systematically establish methods for using the most efficient and effective channel with the personal and professional people in your life. Remember that your professional communication will likely include interactions with both colleagues and patients. Realistically, your patient communication will need to reach patients directly and should also include their family and caregivers in order to be efficient and effective. Your communication strategy should start with the construction of a database where you ascertain and record individual channel preferences, the presence of infrastructure available to reach each person, and the format preferences for communication. Format preferences will include face-to-face, print, audiovisual, and electronic.

Here is some good news. We have now reached the point where 93% of Americans have cellular connectivity. Fully 50% of the portable information appliances being carried are now smartphones that, for the most part, include connectivity to a WiFi or cellular broadband network. Most of these devices are always turned on and are carried on the majority of these

end-user persons or are kept within 3 feet of them. Cellular networks cover about 95% of the continental United States. Many airlines have this connectivity via WiFi at 32,000 feet in flight.

Although there are some people who prefer face-to-face communication, one study showed that 82% of Americans are visual learners. This may explain why YouTube is becoming the second most popular search engine on the Internet. Other studies have shown that printed leaflets that are provided without supporting verbal information may actually decrease medication regimen adherence in patients. Another interesting occurrence is that communication over social networks is becoming more prevalent than the use of e-mail. With all of these various changes and preferences, we recommend that you periodically poll your colleagues and patients (and their families) upon admission to improve your connectivity and telecommunication channel management.

No technology solution for channel and/or format will ever reach 100% of your stakeholders. There are people who are holding out on purchasing cell phones, joining social networks, participating in online banking, or opening their homes to what they see as an invasion by the Internet. We suggest that the number of these people is diminishing at a rapid rate. The creation of the menu of options to establish preferences for how to telecommunicate with the people in your life and in what format will yield a good return on investment. We continue to wonder how even the most progressive health care system imaginable will be able to achieve its potential unless patients are connected, engaged, and participating in self-care management.

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Are you aware that the next phase of meaningful use requirements includes the ability for patients to be able to view, download, and transmit information to and from their electronic health records? This will further necessitate the credentialing of these patients so that their identity and access to protected health information will be assured. E-mail communication, for example, will need to be secured. This can be achieved by encrypting the content of e-mails sent to patients who must then authenticate their identity to view the information. Another option would be to direct patients by e-mail to a patient portal or personal health record that would be housed behind a firewall within the health system.

Ideally, the database for channel management will be integrated with electronic health records, documentation tools, and front/back office systems. Someday, there will be a mobile app that supports the integration of people, data, and systems within a multidisciplinary

care team. You may have read how we promote a new set of 5 rights. These are the right person doing the right intervention in the right facility for the right patient at the right time. We have the technology to achieve channel management for the most part. What we need next is the integration strategy to utilize these channels once we have collected them from our colleagues, our patients, and their caregivers.

As we said at the beginning, we believe you are already employing informal strategies to handle telecommunication channel management in your life. Now we ask that you would systematically incorporate this into your workload and work flow to optimize the effectiveness of your communication. The addition of telecommunication management to your practice toolbox can only improve your efficiency and effectiveness. We would like to continue this conversation, and you can contact Bill at felkebg@auburn.edu and Brent at foxbren@auburn.edu. ■

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