

A Nurse Consultant's Prescription for Increasing Patient Satisfaction

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Problem of Interest: Healthcare systems are purchasing technology-based tools that improve the patient experience but are struggling to fit the new solutions into existing workflows and achieve staff adoption. The deployment of such tools requires a talented and skilled consultant who can lead them to success.

Purpose: The purpose of this article is to describe the personal approach of a nurse consultant's process, and the challenges and successes of deploying innovative healthcare technology aimed at improving the patient experience.

Practice Implication: Hospital administrative leadership can gain insight into the process and development of incorporating technology allowing the patient experience to be improved through the story of an industry expert.

Florence Nightingale originally published *Notes on Nursing*¹ in 1859, and nearly 155 years later, the common theme of setting patient expectations still exists. She stated that “apprehension, uncertainty, waiting, expectation, fear of surprise, do a patient more harm than any exertion.”¹ Her words are relevant years later; for today, hospital systems are addressing those same concerns using technology in innovative ways. Currently, healthcare facilities are using questionnaires, known as the Hospital Consumer Assessment of Healthcare Providers and Systems (HCAHPS), as standards for ranking, comparing, and reimbursing hospitals. Healthcare professionals are recognizing that a patient’s disappointment stemming from an unexpected turn of events or from being unprepared for the hospital experience can be negative for both the patient and the hospital. Today, hospitals are ranked and reimbursed based in part by how patients respond to the HCAHPS questionnaires regarding their recent hospital experience. Concerns with reimbursement are forcing hospital systems to discover new and creative methods to educate patients, not only on their upcoming procedure or chronic condition, but also on what to expect if an overnight hospital stay is anticipated.

This how-to article describes a nurse consultant’s successful approach to implementing innovative technology patient engagement solutions within a hospital system.

SURVEY OVERVIEW

HCAHPS scores are critical measurements for acute care hospitals. HCAHPS survey is a random, standardized, national survey given to hospital patients who require an overnight stay. The survey asks the patient to rate the hospital on areas considered central to quality and satisfaction efforts of the facility.

The HCAHPS scoring system was introduced in 2002 when Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS) united with the Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality (AHRQ) to develop the survey. The scores took on far greater importance when CMS was to implement a Value-Based Purchasing Program (VBP) as directed in the Deficit Reduction Act of 2005. The idea behind the VBP was to tie hospital reimbursement rates to the hospital’s overall performance as measured by HCAHPS. The Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act specifically directed Medicare to base reimbursement rates on the quality of a hospital and not just the quantity of services performed.² The HCAHPS data are public and posted quarterly on www.medicare.gov/hospitalcompare. Reimbursement rates are tied to the public HCAHPS scores.

The heightened importance of HCAHPS scores and associated reimbursement rates is leading hospitals to explore ways to improve the patient experience and overall satisfaction with the hospital visit. Providers and administrative leaders are turning to healthcare technology companies for help.

PATIENT ENGAGEMENT SOLUTIONS

One type of innovative technology on the market is an interactive “patient engagement solution.” A patient engagement solution assists patients to be an active participant in

their care through the use of collaborative learning tools. Patients can view informative, online educational programs using computers, tablets, or mobile devices they currently own. Patients can advance through the programs prescribed by their healthcare provider at their own pace and view the programs as often as needed. Individuals can pass along the programs to their circle of care providers such as family members or friends. The solution also allows healthcare providers to track the progress of the patient’s education in real time, and the ability to acquire usage statistics for benchmarking results through a self-contained portal. In addition, the data can be integrated into an electronic health record portal.

One educational program using innovative technology addresses issues currently measured by the HCAHPS survey. The survey measures communications between the patient and the provider, medication management, the patient’s perception of the healing environment and how to prepare for recovery at home. The patient engagement program provides educational information without coaching the patient on how to answer the survey questions. However, the patient engagement program does discuss the same concepts measured by the HCAHPS survey to prepare the patient for what to expect when they spend an overnight in the hospital.

AN APPROACH TO IMPLEMENTATION

A healthcare technology company deploys its own personnel in a consultant role for the hospital deployment of the purchased technology and to service the product when needed. The consultant must be well equipped to handle the ever-changing healthcare environment by being detail oriented, organized, flexible, and completely aware of clinical workflows and business unit goals.

The best starting point for a consultant during the planning stages of a deployment is to understand the clinical workflows of the department or agency. Workflows will vary dramatically based on the type of system being implementing and the technology being used. The consultant will need to alter one’s approach for a small community hospital as opposed to a large, complex system. Both large and small systems recognize that patient satisfaction needs are being measured and each requires its own direction towards improvement. Regardless of size, the consultant needs to start by understanding the workflows since the ultimate goal is to incorporate the new technology into existing processes as seamlessly as possible.

Initially, an assessment of the organization’s plan for usage in the system should be undertaken. The consultant needs to cover several important points during this high-level pre-implementation assessment. For example, the consultant will need to know whether the technology will be deployed in a selected number of departments or whether it will go house-wide. The consultant will also need to ask whether the new technology usage will be mandated or encouraged in a “nice to have” concept. An especially important point is to know whether the hospital intends on deploying patient satisfaction tools in a stand-alone environment or whether it will be

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