

Strengths and Deficiencies in the Content of US Radiology Private Practices' Websites

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Abstract

Purpose: The Internet provides a potentially valuable mechanism for radiology practices to communicate with patients and enhance the patient experience. The aim of this study was to assess the websites of US radiology private practices, with attention to the frequency of content of potential patient interest.

Methods: The 50 largest private practice radiology facilities in the United States were identified from RadiologyBusiness.com. Websites were reviewed for information content and functionality.

Results: Content regarding radiologists' names, medical schools, residencies, fellowships, photographs, and board certification status; contact for billing questions; and ability to make online payments was present on 80% to 98% of sites. Content regarding examination preparation, contrast use, examination duration, description of examination experience, scheduling information, directions, privacy policy, radiologists' role in interpretation, and ACR accreditation was present on 60% to 78%. Content regarding accepted insurers, delivery of results to referrers, report turnaround times, radiologists' years of experience, radiation safety, and facility hours was present on 40% to 58%. Content regarding technologist certification, registration forms, instructions for requesting a study on disc, educational videos, and patient testimonials was present on 20% to 38%. Content regarding examination prices, patient satisfaction scores, peer review, online scheduling, online report and image access, and parking was present on <20%.

Conclusions: Radiology practices' websites most frequently provided information regarding their radiologists' credentials, as well as billing and payment options. Information regarding quality, safety, and the examination experience, as well as non-payment-related online functionality, was less common. These findings regarding the most common deficiencies may be useful for radiology practices in expanding their websites' content, thereby improving communication and potentially the patient experience.

Key Words: Radiologists, radiology practices, Internet, patient communication, patient experience

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INTRODUCTION

Communicating with health care providers is a key aspect of the patient experience. Robust communication not only improves patient satisfaction, as indicated by Press Ganey survey results [1], but also improves patient outcomes [2]. The Internet serves as an increasingly important mechanism for patient communication in health care, as

patients seek information online to complement direct communications with their providers [3]. Patients use such online health information not only to learn of specific disease entities and treatments but also to gain familiarity with the physicians and practices providing their care. For example, patients may use patient ratings websites to access reviews of a given physician or facility [4,5], as well as "transparency" websites to compare facilities in terms of measures of the cost and quality of care [6,7]. However, health care practices may also use their own practice websites to communicate directly with their patients, providing information regarding such topics as the practices' physicians, conditions managed, and tests and treatments offered. When offering complete and accurate information that addresses patients' most

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likely questions, such practice websites have the potential to improve the experience for patients seeking care.

The Internet may be of particular value as a means of patient communication for radiology practices. Patients often have an incomplete understanding of imaging examinations and have a desire for more information regarding scheduled imaging tests. For example, one study reported that outpatients commonly did not know whether their upcoming imaging examination entailed radiation as well as oral or intravenous contrast, had not received a satisfactory explanation of the test in advance, and had remaining unanswered questions [8]. In addition, patients often have a poor understanding of the role of radiologists in their medical care [9], potentially not knowing that radiologists are physicians or even not recognizing in the first place that dedicated individuals interpreted their imaging studies and provided the results to their referring physicians [8]. Also, after imaging studies, patients expect to be able to easily access their test results [10,11]. To address such issues, radiology practices can use their own practice websites to communicate with their patients, whether before or after an imaging study, and thereby enhance the patient experience as it relates to undergoing an imaging examination. We therefore conducted this study to assess the websites of US radiology private practices, with attention to the frequency of content of potential patient interest.

METHODS

Because this study did not entail human subjects research, approval from the institutional review board was not required. The 50 largest private practice radiology facilities in the United States were identified from RadiologyBusiness.com [12]. One of these practices was excluded because it was a teleradiology practice solely providing professional services; the 51st listed practice was substituted in its place. A public website was identified for each of the included practices via Google searches. We derived a list of 45 measures (Table 1) with which to evaluate these websites after an initial overview of the websites. These factors generally related to information regarding the practices' radiologists, the practices' business operations, the patient experience, quality and safety, and billing and payment information. Factors were constructed in a binary factor (ie, either present or absent on the given website) to assess all factors in a uniform fashion. Two authors (EJ and AR) jointly reviewed each practice website in its entirety to score the website in terms of the identified factors,

consulting with a third author (AD) when disagreeing for any given factor. The percentage of the 50 radiology practice websites that was positive for each factor was computed.

RESULTS

Table 1 presents the frequency of each of the assessed factors for the 50 private practice radiology websites. Content regarding radiologists' names, medical schools, residencies, fellowships, photographs, and board certification status; contact information for billing questions; and the ability to make online payments was present on 80% to 98% of websites. Content regarding examination preparation (eg, fasting or bloodwork), contrast agent use, examination duration, a general description of the examination experience, contact information for scheduling, facility map or directions, the practice privacy policy, reference to the role of the radiologist in image interpretation, ACR accreditation, and a link to the practice's Facebook page was present on 60% to 78% of websites. Content regarding accepted insurers, delivery of results to referring physicians, report turnaround times, radiologists' years of experience, radiation safety, facility hours, a link to RadiologyInfo.org, and a link to the practice's Twitter feed was present on 40% to 58% of websites. Content regarding technologist certification, online patient registration forms, instructions for requesting a copy of an imaging study on disc, educational patient videos, and patient testimonials was present on 20% to 38% of websites. Finally, content regarding examination prices, patient satisfaction scores, performance of peer review, the ability to schedule examinations online, online report or image access, parking information, and availability of the website in other languages was present on fewer than 20% of websites.

DISCUSSION

Physician-patient communication is an important determinant of patient satisfaction [13]. However, diagnostic radiologists generally do not directly interact with patients during routine imaging encounters. At the same time, radiology practice websites may serve as an alternative means for radiologists to communicate with their patients and convey valuable information. By taking advantage of this opportunity and providing complete and accurate online information, radiology practices can help improve their patients' understanding of examinations, experience during the actual studies, and, ideally, overall levels of

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