

Closing the Gaps in Health Care to Achieve Better Outcomes



Tailored strategies tuned to patient needs can overcome obstacles to patient engagement

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Medical director and vice chair, Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center—Harvard Medical School

Amid the shift to value-based care, reducing the burden of chronic disease is one of the biggest challenges facing the health care field today.

This widely sought-after goal is beset by significant obstacles. A big part of the problem is lack of patient engagement, or patients not being adequately involved in care decisions and follow-up care.

“Studies suggest that patients who are well-informed, educated about their condition and involved in their health care decisions not only have greater satisfaction of care, but also tend to have better outcomes and lower costs,” Ted James, M.D., medical director and vice chair at Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center—Harvard Medical School, wrote in an Oct. 10, 2018, post on the medical school’s “Lean Forward” page of its CME Online portal.

Rather than empowering patients in self-care, current systems of fragmented care often leave patients disengaged, providing them with few resources and an abundance of frustrating tasks such as duplicate requests and long waits. James added that “as disruptive innovators seek to fill the gap in meeting the needs of our patients, proactive health care leaders can leverage opportunities provided through clinical innovations to achieve greater patient engagement.”

Moving Beyond the Annual Doctor's Visit

3 Ways to Keep Patients Engaged

1 Use consumer-health tech (smart-phone or other device) for patients to access both their providers and metrics, and to understand what those metrics mean. Such metrics may include patient BMI, how long patients are sleeping at night and how many steps they walk every day.

2 Use technology to provide access to contextualized, relevant information and feedback needed to help patients make important lifestyle decisions and achieve desired outcomes. A patient who views relevant data might see a connection between eating dinner later than usual and a poor night's sleep, or a connection between staying up late and walking fewer steps the next day.

3 Set adaptable goals. If a patient is simply unable to meet goals that have been set, the goals can be adjusted to make them more attainable. Otherwise, the patient might get discouraged and drop out of the program. At the same time, patients who easily meet their goals or even exceed them could be ready for goals that are a bit more challenging, if that could further improve their health.

Experts agree that patients need to take more responsibility for managing their chronic diseases, and to do that they need to become more educated about their conditions and their overall health.

Yet, while patient education is part of the solution, often "knowledge is simply not enough," says Eric Hekler, Ph.D., professor and director of the Center for Wireless and Population Health Systems at the University of California San Diego.

Just as important, Hekler says, is building a health behavior-change plan "that someone creates for themselves to change their own behavior and capabilities."

Lack of patient engagement is a complex problem that will take time to solve, but progress is being made in closing the gaps. Patient-engagement technologies can help to move the provider-patient relationship beyond basic transactions and annual visits. Providers can use mHealth apps and chronic disease management technology to deliver the patient education necessary for making healthful decisions. And as technology advances, these tools are becoming more sophisticated and can deliver more personalized health.

On the patient side, new technological tools make it easier and more convenient for patients to take care of themselves and engage with providers outside the four walls of a hospital or clinic. For example, digital tools enable patients to engage on their own terms and on their own time without having to go to a physician's office. In addition, digital health coaching can serve as an extension of the primary care team and even offload some of the care burden from the primary care physician.

Payers realize the important benefits to be gained by greater patient engagement and increased connectivity between patients and providers. As technology has made it easier for such connections to occur, payers have become more willing to utilize tools like digital coaching, telehealth and remote patient care.

"It's not telling them what to do," says Hekler, whose research focuses on individualized and precise behavior change for fostering long-term health and well-being. "It's telling them how to discover what to do. If you have irritable-bowel syndrome, how do you figure out whether eating something actually flares your symptoms or not? You systematize when you eat the food and monitor what happens to your symptoms."

In addition, Hekler emphasizes that increasing patient engagement requires changing the power differentials between patients and providers. Providers need to work on empathizing with a person, particularly if he or she is noncompliant.





Tailor Programs to Personal Goals

Experts say that to attain success, patient-engagement strategies must be tailored to help patients meet important personal health goals, such as improving the quality of their sleep. Successful programs include these actions:

- Assess the readiness of patients to make changes in their behavior.
- Participate with a health coach to create program goals and/or a health plan.
- Adjust recommendations, communication and treatment decisions to reflect where the patient is on the road to change.
- Collaborate with patients to build self-management skills.

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Why are these elements crucial for successful patient engagement? Research published in the *Journal of Medical Internet Research* in 2017 has shown that chronic care management programs have dropout rates as high as 80 percent. Collaboration among patients, clinicians and health coaches is essential. “To maintain motivation, our study points to the importance of combining eHealth with regular face-to-face consultations,” the researchers said, adding that “it seems important to facilitate more user-friendly but high-security eHealth technology.”

“One of the metaphors I use is: If you’re trying to help a hungry person, you can either give him a fish or teach him how to fish,” Hekler says. “We’re basically trying to help people figure out how to change their behavior. Activity monitors allow us to provide far more personalized and precise recommendations.”

Wearable activity trackers can help to achieve goals such as greater physical activity, but ongoing success requires tuning, Hekler says. “People are different, context matters and both change. We find that when some people are stressed, they walk more; when other people are stressed, they walk less. There are going to be days when you can walk 10,000 steps, and other days when you’ll be able to walk 15,000 steps.”

Similarly, wearable trackers can help patients improve their quality of sleep, such as by prompting patients to enter information about activities that can impact their sleep. Examples include caffeine consumption, bedtime snacks and whether patients are experiencing high levels of stress.

Overcoming Obstacles to Success

Despite the availability of promising new tools, those seeking to close the gaps in patient engagement continue to deal with significant obstacles like a lack of staff and staff training. These obstacles can be overcome with more widespread use of health coaching, which can address questions to physicians that come up between visits and help individualize strategies to reach health-related goals.

Obstacles also can arise from a lack of resources for new program development and poor results from a previous program. But value-based care cannot succeed without patient engagement. Consequently, investments in processes and technologies designed to proactively identify and address the health needs of patients and their families become differentiators. At the same time, health providers and their sponsoring organizations can use the results of programs that did not perform as expected to discern what did work, and use that information to create better, more cost-effective programs.

Patient-engagement strategies do not need to be resource-intensive. Delivering timely, relevant and helpful interventions to patients not only helps improve patient experiences, but also results in better outcomes and lower health care costs.

Most of the added work involved in patient-engagement initiatives falls to doctors and nurses, says Hekler. “How do we build this so we’re always allowing each person to be working at the top of his or her game? What is the thing that physicians should be doing? How do we make sure they’re not just typing notes, but deeply listening to what’s going on in a patient’s life and figuring out how to help them? A lot of these digital tools are not there yet.”

The new patient-engagement tools also involve more work for patients, and it’s important that they believe using the tools is worth the time and trouble, Hekler adds.

“Every time you interact with a tool, which includes charging a wearable and putting it on your wrist, that’s going to slowly accumulate a perceived sense of burden, judged relative to the value of it,” he says. “Figuring out how to balance the value versus the burden is going to be really important.”

Fortunately, finding the proper balance is attainable, if the right technologies are used in the right ways. Doing so will allow health care to catch up with other industries, such as transportation, which have forged ahead in digital engagement with the people they serve.

“Embracing patient empowerment, along with health technologies that support self-care, will ultimately improve our ability to interact with our patients and enhance the quality of care,” James said in his “Lean Forward” article. “A digital health revolution is coming, and those who prepare and are ready to adapt stand to reap the benefits.”

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