

Modernizing Your Practice's Communication

Using technology to improve patient engagement, outcomes, and satisfaction

How communication expectations have changed

Clear, efficient communication within a healthcare practice is beneficial, not only for optimizing workflow among staff but also for impacting patient outcomes. "If either the patient or health care provider lacks a clear understanding of the information conveyed, the delivery of care is compromised," writes Haran Ratna in the Harvard Public Health Review.

As patient expectations have changed, healthcare practices must focus on improving and modernizing communication to meet evolving

patient demands. Patients have expressed their interest in a more consumer-like experience and want communication with their provider to be easier. Compared to other industries, healthcare has been slow to deliver that personalized experience to which patients have become accustomed.

"COVID has been a huge shift in a lot of aspects of patient communications and kind of expectations around that. What COVID effectively has done is accelerate the march if you will, toward digital types of communication," says Dr. Andrew Brooks,



co-founder, and chief medical officer of TigerConnect, a clinical communication and collaboration solutions provider in the United States. "They want to use communication technology to easily connect with their doctors and caregivers.

"Healthcare has never been held to the same standard of service that other industries have adopted," Brooks adds. "Our healthcare experience was detached and siloed, making it difficult for patients to interact with their doctors. Today there is real momentum around making healthcare delivery easier through software and new modes of communication and patient engagement while still maintaining HIPAA compliance. The time is ripe for this type of transformation."

Consequences of Poor Communication

Poor communication is the bane of any practice. It can lead to any number of problems, from medical mistakes to patient non-adherence to care plans, missed appointments to frustration among patients and staff. According to the Harvard Public Health Review¹, communication within a practice is bidirectional: "Patients need to be able to convey information about their health complaints to healthcare workers...healthcare workers must

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convey adequate information to patients to help them take preventative measures in order to maintain their health."

"There's a couple of major consequences of poor communication," Brooks says. "We're all here because of patients and wanting to make the patient experience and take care of a problem they've got. When you have really poor communication, it's not only a super frustrating experience for the patient, it actually opens your practice up to risk. Most lawsuits and malpractice issues extend out of poor patient communication. Therefore, it's critically important that we fix this problem of how we communicate with patients."

Since poor communication can also lead to medical mistakes and staff burnout, improving communication methods and processes can address these challenges. According to the Institute for Healthcare Communication, good communication between staff positively affects the quality of their work experience and patient safety; there's a direct link between healthcare staff's own level of satisfaction and their ability to express compassion and concern for patients. "I'm a big believer that the more tightly attached to a practice a patient is, the more compliant they are with treatment recommendations, and the safer they feel," Brooks says. "Just having that reassurance is helpful on many levels. Practices need the ability to actually communicate out to their patients, for example sending text messages regarding a treatment plan or answering patients' questions. I'm a big believer that the more tightly attached to a practice a patient is, the more compliant they are with treatment recommendations and the safer they feel from having reassurances."

This is confirmed in a recently published report by The Joint Commission outlining the value in providing more connected transitional care for patients that



impacts outcomes. According to the report, patients and family caregivers desired the following outcomes when experiencing care transition:

1. Feeling cared about by medical providers
2. Sensing clear accountability from the health system regarding who is responsible for overseeing their care, and who to contact for help
3. Feeling prepared and capable to care for themselves, especially any potential complications

When these outcomes are achieved, care is perceived as excellent and providers as trustworthy and there is a direct correlation to patient outcomes.

Advances in Practice Communication

Digital communication solutions are no longer optional in a healthcare practice, Brooks says. Healthcare has slowly moved out of the analog age of paper charts and pagers, instituting electronic health records, mobile apps, and telehealth services.

The days of sending paper communications are also almost over, Brooks suggests. While a few offices still use e fax machines, modern practices will leverage cloud-based and mobile-friendly communication platforms, with HIPAA-compliant texting streamlining day-to-day operations.

According to the Journal of mHealth, practices need to invest in "unified communications and patient engagement platform in the cloud". Adopting a digital strategy can provide seamless connections across multiple modes of communication, including messaging, video, and social media, as well as devices such as smartphones.

Additionally, practices should have some form of virtual care available, be it through an app or a website portal. Brooks cites the ability of the



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TigerConnect solution to enable multiple family members and/or care providers to virtually call in on a single group call to discuss patient care. This flexible functionality allows care teams to better coordinate their efforts and ensure optimal outcomes.

Allowing patients to communicate with their doctors using the channel and device of their choice can enhance the experience and improve results as many adoptees are beginning to document. In addition, automated services such as scheduling appointments, reminders, and even bill payments have proven to have quality results.

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Protecting Your Patient's PPI and PHR

With so much private, personal patient data changing hands, it is crucial for a practice to utilize communication methods that meet HIPAA guidelines and inspire trust in the patients. Practices should seek communication platforms that have achieved HITRUST Certification, a framework developed by the Health Information Trust Alliance. This certification ensures a stringent level of security, which Brooks calls "a very difficult bar to achieve regarding the way systems are architected."

Utilizing communication platforms that are not HIPAA compliant, such as the free version of Zoom or other common applications, runs the risk of data breaches, does not meet best practices for security, and increases a practice's risk of litigation.



By now, most practices have adapted to an electronic health record (EHR), which enables patients and healthcare providers to have easy access to health data that they need for optimal patient care. Communication software should be capable of integrating with the EHR to foster strong connections to the variety of stakeholders involved in the patient's care, from laboratories, to hospitals, to outside specialists, Brooks says. TigerConnect's platform is agnostic and will integrate with most EHR solutions.

The ability to message and collaborate with clinical peers such as referral doctors who are not using the same EHR is also a huge benefit of incorporating a unified communication platform. Brooks cites TigerConnect's "Message Anyone" capability that is capable of sending a secure message via text or email to a specialist who is not using the platform. The ability to pass patient information forward safely and quickly speeds up the often tedious process for a consult request and referral.

Improve patient outcomes and satisfaction

According to the Institute for Healthcare Communication, "Research evidence indicates that there are strong positive relationships between a healthcare team member's communication skills and a patient's capacity to follow through with medical recommendations, self-manage a chronic medical condition, and adopt preventive health behaviors."

The Institute writes that patient satisfaction is dependent upon several factors, but at the top are "expectations" and "communication." Expectations mean that patients have been provided an opportunity to "tell their story." Communication led to improved satisfaction when "members of the healthcare team took the problem seriously,



explained information clearly, and tried to understand the patient's experience, and provided viable options."

Strong communication methods and a user-friendly communication and patient engagement platform improve patient outcomes and satisfaction. Engaging with patients can include:

- sending appointment reminders by text or email
- texting visit prep documents for completion prior to visit
- care follow-up to improve care plan adherence and outcomes
- referrals to specialists for continuity of care

"Care follow-up is huge," says Brooks. "It can be a follow-up phone call, a text, or even lead into a video chat," he explains. While he says that most patients are healthy the majority of the time, by staying connected to patients, "in the unfortunate times when there's something of consequence going on, then keeping them engaged is going to optimize the outcome.

Getting Started

Using a cloud-based communication platform, such as TigerConnect is not a heavy lift for practices. Because it is cloud-based there is no hardware to purchase or install and it doesn't require weeks to bring it live. Most importantly, it's scalable to grow as your needs change. For example, physician scheduling software can be integrated into the platform and provide staff with real-time visibility on a doctor's availability with a quick glance.

In addition, the flexibility of the cloud allows the platform to adapt to new software solutions. Looking to integrate a communication solution with your EHR? No problem, TigerConnect can integrate with multiple solutions.



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If you're ready to improve and upgrade your communication capabilities, take a look at our recommendations when reviewing current options. Also, reach out to learn more about our highly reliable and user-friendly platform.

Getting started: Tips for Evaluating Vendors

of modernizing communications firmly in mind, now it's time to get started in your practice. Choosing a vendor requires knowing the right questions to ask. Here are some good starting points:

- 1. ROI: Does the solution significantly reduce costs and improve workflows?**
If the solution doesn't improve your bottom line, it's not worth the cost.
- 2. Integration: Can the communication solution integrate with other medical practices? If yes, does the provider possess that integration expertise?**
A communication solution that integrates real-time information from a variety of channels brings higher value.
- 3. Training and support: What types of training and support are offered to ensure your employees**



are properly on-boarded and your organization is getting value from the solution?

To increase the chance of high adoption among staff, you need solid training, accessible troubleshooting, and easy-to-use interfaces for all admins. Need to address support here.

4. Data and Analytics: Does the vendor provide access to analytics and insights to help benchmark your performance against other similar organizations?

A comprehensive communication system will track data that can be easily organized and aggregated to measure benchmarks for success. Analytics and reporting should be built in, and the right partner can help a practice track the most important metrics.

5. Security and HIPAA compliance: Is the solution secure and HIPAA compliant?

It's crucial to do your research and validate whether a communications platform is truly HIPAA compliant to reduce your risk of fines and data breaches.

6. Reliability and Availability: How reliable is the platform?

Practices don't have time to deal with system downtimes. Seek out vendors with an excellent track record and evidence of consistent system uptime.

Discovering what works for your practice

Upgrading and improving communication strategies may take some time, but practices should make it a priority if they hope to thrive. ■

About TigerConnect

TigerConnect transforms healthcare with the industry's most widely adopted clinical collaboration platform – uniquely modernizing how doctors, nurses, care teams, patients, and data connect. With solutions spanning care communication, patient engagement, scheduling, alarm notifications, nurse call, and more, TigerConnect accelerates productivity, reduces costs, and improves patient outcomes, safely and securely. Trusted by more than 7,000 healthcare organizations for user-friendly yet enterprise-ready solutions, TigerConnect delivers 99.99% verifiable uptime for more than 10 million messages each day. To learn more about TigerConnect, visit www.tigerconnect.com.

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