

# Driving true patient engagement beyond the basic patient portal



## *Comprehensive patient view, communication and data sharing, and population health management are key components*

Federal agencies have been incenting healthcare providers to leverage their electronic health records (EHRs) to get patients involved in the management of their care. Most organizations, however, haven't moved beyond patient engagement as an item to be checked off in order to receive meaningful use incentive funding.

Typically, providers rely on patient portal functionality that healthcare IT vendors package with their EHR products. While fulfilling requirements of meaningful use, these basic portals are EHR-tethered and single source, and have done very little to engage patients in their care. The next-generation portals, however, are interoperable, which allows them to be an integral part of a robust patient engagement initiative – one that transforms patient behavior and mindset so patients can take an active role in their self-care.

Healthcare organizations need to seize opportunities to use technology much more effectively to support patients in managing their healthcare. Portals can enable organizations to make progress toward population health management, said P. Nelson Le, MD, senior clinical

advisor for InterSystems. However, patient engagement will bring benefits to organizations only if it presents a unified and comprehensive view of the patient record, enables efficient communication and data sharing between patients and providers, and offers a platform from which to improve management of population health, Le believes.

### **Is engagement really working?**

From a patient perspective, portals are often a burden and can make very little sense. That's because each provider organization that touches a patient is likely to have a separate portal, with each requiring different registrations, log-ins and passwords, and showing a wide range of data displayed differently. A patient with complex conditions may have records with inpatient and outpatient providers, specialists, laboratories and others. The multiplicity of portals makes the patients' lives difficult, and doesn't present a unified view of their medical information; in fact, this might be disengaging patients, not engaging them, Le contends.

Current, single source technology needs to be adapted to create a "one-stop

shopping experience" for patients. This way, "They can enter one portal and see their medical, pharmacy, laboratory, insurance and other information," Le added.

Furthermore, most patient portals "represent a one-way street for patients, presenting information from their medical records in a read-only format," according to Le. Such portals offer little or no opportunity for patients to add relevant follow-up information on their current condition, response to drugs or treatment, or other indicators of their health status.

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*– P. Nelson Le, MD  
Senior Clinical  
Advisor  
InterSystems*

“To fully engage patients, organizations need to provide more services to them,” he said. “That’s what differentiates a patient engagement environment from a basic patient portal.”

Physicians could take a leading role in encouraging patients to use engagement products, but generally don’t because most available applications don’t do enough to support the physician-patient relationship. “Patient engagement solutions need to be mutually beneficial to both patients and physicians,” Le said.

## Assisting workflow and information flow

Providers trying to coordinate care benefit from effective patient engagement. “For physicians to take good care of their patients, they need to know what happens between patient visits,” he said. “Most physicians won’t find out patients are having trouble with medication or having symptoms for months, and they lose that time in which they can intervene.”

Patient engagement also can streamline communication between patient and physician. “Today, physician-patient interaction is still predominantly telephone-based,” he noted. Office staff triage incoming calls, and trying to coordinate responses is ineffective and inefficient. “Each message requires looking up the patient record, reviewing the history, completing the specified request and documenting the actions,” Le said. The process is inefficient because there are too many unnecessary steps, and the data needed to take action is not easily accessible.

“By integrating the patient request to a comprehensive patient chart, decisions can be made faster, because workflows are streamlined and efficient.” In this

model, portals and related technology would be seen as supporting communication between patients and clinicians, gaining support from both and offering a value-add for the organization.

Communication through portal technology is more secure than email and can involve simultaneous communication with the entire team of clinicians involved in a patient’s care. “That can improve the efficiency and make sure we get the right care to patients,” Le said.

## Improving clinician performance with current data

Patient engagement also provides benefits to physicians who increasingly are attempting to manage patient care in order to keep them as healthy as possible and minimize healthcare expenditures – two key goals under risk-based reimbursement systems. Keeping patients healthy and managing those with chronic disease requires identifying gaps in care, which is the purpose of clinical alerts within the clinical information system. Clinical alerts enable physicians to proactively intervene before, for example, a patient’s condition deteriorates and more costly treatment is required.

“Access to timely, accurate, and comprehensive data is critical for medical decision-making,” Le said. Each clinical information system, such as lab, pharmacy and medical records, only captures and analyzes a fragmented data set. Data within each of these systems may not trigger an alert, “but when taken together, that information would be significant and evoke clinical action” Le said. “You really need to bring all the components of an alerting system into one interoperability

platform.” The next step is to incorporate patient-contributed data into medical decision-making.

Advanced portals offer opportunities to solicit regular and consistent feedback from patients on key aspects of their condition. “Often, the feedback is so delayed that the quality of care can be negatively impacted,” he said. “Better data enables better decisions, which ultimately leads to better patient care.”

Many health professionals have voiced concern that, by letting patients add information to their medical records, some patients may supply too much information. “This is no different than when a patient is in front of you during an office visit. Part of a physician’s responsibility is to tease out what is relevant and what is noise,” Le said. “Engaging patients and allowing them to contribute data is important since the bigger risk is losing contact with patients between encounters.” Portal solutions should enhance engagement and improve communication and coordination between patients and physicians.

Patient engagement approaches should be robust enough to compel physicians to say “this is the best way for you to get all of your comprehensive medical history in one place, and this is the most convenient way for you to contact me and get a prompt reply on services you need,” Le said. “And this is the most timely and accurate way for you to let me know how you are doing so we can collaborate on how to manage your health.”