

# The New Age of Healthcare Communications

By Gabrielle DeTora and Neal Linkon



Why developing a patient portal should be part of your strategy.

**W**e live in the interactive age, where each day brings us faster and smarter access to information. However, the use of interactive innovation is only beginning to gain momentum in hospitals and healthcare systems across the country. Healthcare marketers are learning that consumers no longer want hospital Web site access just for job searches, class registration, volunteer opportunities, hospital foundation donations or bill pay. In a 2008 Deloitte Survey of Healthcare Consumers, “60 percent [of respondents] want physicians to provide online access to medical records, test results and online appointment scheduling; one in four said they would pay more for the service.”

Many hospital CEOs recognize the strategic importance of deploying digital technologies. This heightened awareness is driven by the reality that 160 million Americans use the Internet for health information, and two-thirds of physicians use the Internet for clinical information (WebMD). CEOs are now beginning to see the positive effects that smart interactive initiatives can have on physician loyalty, nurse recruitment and retention and patient satisfaction. However, while technologies such as electronic health records (EHR) and wireless nursing stations are growing in use, the marketplace demands more.

Hospital executives can meet emerging market needs by launching a patient portal where patients can access their medical information and collaborate with their physicians, nurses and more in a secure and convenient manner. CEOs who want to maintain a competitive advantage should empower their strategic planning, marketing and IT teams to move beyond the norm and create new value for stakeholders using interactive tools and media, including patient portals.

### Why Use Patient Portals?

According to the 2009 Industry Survey from HealthLeaders Media, less than 5 percent of hospitals have interactive patient portals. By 2014 however, more than three quarters of hospitals expect to have patient portals. There are certainly advantages to being first to market because it allows physicians and nurses to build better relationships with patients through flexible and sophisticated communications. It can improve patient satisfaction, which in turn will help physicians to retain patients and grow their practices. That was certainly borne out by the Aurora Health Care experience, where the health system documented that nearly 7 percent of all registrants to their patient portal were new patients, with many offering that the availability of the portal was at least a factor in their selection of an Aurora doctor; some said it was the determining factor. Furthermore, Aurora also determined that existing patients who signed up for its portal used Aurora services 9 percent more in the year after signing up than in the year before.

**Consumer expectations.** Think about all the things in your life that you do online, from banking to shopping to vacation planning to filing taxes. Some people even find their spouses online. Why should healthcare be any different? When it comes to non-urgent communication and access to information, patients will increasingly come to expect these kinds of online services.

**Improved cost efficiencies.** Hospitals and health systems using patient portals report reduced call volumes and shorter on-hold times. The simple fact that the vast majority of online interactions through a patient portal are a one-to-one elimination of phone call volume is a savings for hospital and clinic staff. When Aurora Health Care surveyed clinic staff using its portal with patients, the clinics that got the highest message volume through the portal reported the highest level of satisfaction. Staff reported that they could get to these messages when

they had time set aside, rather than when the phone is ringing and there is a line of patients at the desk.

**Improved patient satisfaction.** Secure messaging through a patient portal can boost patient satisfaction by allowing patients to submit questions at any time. Clinic or hospital staff can then respond in a timely and appropriate manner, using the method most preferred by patients. Some patients, for example, aren't available to take phone calls during normal business hours. Allowing the response to be securely accessed from within the patient portal can often be the only way to reach these patients. Users of Aurora Health Care's patient portal were surveyed and gave the service high marks for providing better access and better service.

**Better informed patients.** In a Markle Foundation study conducted in early 2008, nearly nine in 10 Americans (88 percent) stated online records would be important in reducing the number of unnecessary or repeated tests and procedures they undergo. While the current evidence is only anecdotal, there are numerous examples of patients who have shared the

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information stored in their patient portal with a current doctor, resulting in hastened treatment and improved outcomes. One example was that of a patient who injured her knee while on vacation. She logged into her patient portal in the ER, allowing the doctor to get up to speed on her medical history and to avoid unnecessary tests and treatments as a result.

### Effective Patient Portals

While some activities, like personal health records, e-mail reminders and customized content, may require a portal, other features could be offered outside of a portal structure, allowing anybody who navigates to the site to pose a question or pay a bill without signing up. There are two primary benefits of offering those services through a true portal.

First of all, the hospital or health system can better validate the patient's identity and offer a higher level of security, allowing for the exchange of more information than would normally be appropriate. Second, the patient will find that everything is easier once inside the portal. They don't have to enter contact information or fill in any field that might otherwise be known about them or their health history.

More important, offering online services through a portal interface starts to build a real relationship. The data is clear

that, once a consumer has set up such an online relationship, they are less likely to leave it to set up a similar one elsewhere. That may be one reason why Aurora Health Care saw an increase in utilization from existing patients after they signed up for its patient portal.

### What Does It Involve?

**Health record.** With few exceptions, these are true personal health records (PHR), so the data is all patient-entered. A very recent exception is MyNYP from New York Presbyterian, which is actually integrating information from its electronic medical record into Microsoft's Health Vault. Other hospitals or systems using Epic's MyChart tool also offer access to selected portions of the patient record. Few patients have shown interest in filling out complete online PHRs, but many find the reconciliation with electronic medical record data to be very useful. In particular, new patients often take advantage of the PHR, which saves them from having to show up 20 minutes early for their first appointment to fill out the medical history forms.

**Appointment scheduling.** For most, this is an appointment request form, but some are experimenting with direct appointment scheduling. Aurora Health Care and Geisinger Health are examples of systems that offer direct scheduling from within their portal. Volumes vary widely, but Henry Ford, as one example, gets thousands of appointment requests every month.

**Online bill management.** This goes beyond just bill payment, allowing patients to see all their pending bills, payments, insurance payments and more. For organizations that offer this capability, it's the most heavily used portion of the portal. Aurora Health Care gets more than \$1 million in payments a month through its online bill management tool.

**Prescription management.** Similar to appointment scheduling, this allows a patient to request a renewal from a physician or, if a refill is remaining on their prescription, to request that directly from a pharmacy. Most hospitals or health systems don't operate their own pharmacies, so utilization of these services in a portal remains modest.

**Physician referral and access.** Also known as secure messaging, this enables patients to reach their doctor's office online with non-urgent requests. Responses are typically offered within a 24- to 48-hour basis and often come from staff, rather than the doctor. For those who offer this service, and who encourage patient use of it, literally thousands of messages are handled each month. Few are offering true e-visits, for which the doctor is reimbursed. Henry Ford is one exception.

**E-mail reminders.** These reminders can alert patients to schedule screenings or appointments or to remind them of an already scheduled appointment. Some organizations are expanding their scope to also offer text message reminders. Early evidence suggests lower no-show rates when these features are offered to patients.

**Other features.** The list of other features offered includes customized health information, personalization of the con-

### Exhibit 1

What patients want from a patient portal

What consumers want online from physicians	Interest in using	Willing to pay extra
Online access to medical records and test results	83%	26%
E-mail access to doctor	76%	23%
Online appointment scheduling	72%	18%
Online health information	69%	12%
Doctor quality online	67%	11%
Prices of services online	65%	9%
What consumers want online from hospitals	Interest in using	Willing to pay extra
Online access to medical records and test results	71%	24%
Hospital quality information online	64%	11%
Prices of services online	62%	10%
Online appointment scheduling	60%	19%
Online health information	59%	11%
After-stay assistance from patient rep	51%	15%

Source: Deloitte Center for Health Solutions (2008)

sumer Web site, hospital or clinic preregistration, registration for classes and events, tracking and screening tools, discussion boards and more.

### Why the Resistance?

According to a 2007 IGCN, Inc. survey, "90 percent of respondents (attendees of the 11th Annual Healthcare Internet Conference) indicated portals will play an important role in the future of healthcare itself." However, when this survey group was asked, "What are your most successful Web strategies?" respondents ranked portals a distant fifth, cited by just 6 percent as the most successful strategy. So, if healthcare leaders

## Exhibit 2

Examples of existing patient portals and services provided

Organization	Health record	Appointment scheduling	Online bill management	Prescription management	Physician referral and access	E-mail reminders
Cleveland Clinic	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓ also offers online second opinions	✓
Atlantic Health	✓		✓	✓		
Aurora Health Care System	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Adventist Hinsdale Hospital	✓	✓	✓			
Decatur Hinsdale Hospital	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓
Geisinger Health	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓
Henry Ford	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓ also offers eVisits
Community Health Network	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓
Sharp Healthcare		✓		✓		
New York Presbyterian	✓					

Source: Greystone.Net

recognize their importance, why aren't more hospital systems adopting them as part of their Web strategies?

**Increasing workloads.** Some healthcare professionals feel it will be an added demand on their time and their staff, which could overwhelm the system. In truth, most doctors spend little or no time responding to patient requests because most are handled by staff, just as phone calls would be. In addition, many organizations allow secure messaging only for existing patients asking about routine health issues or as a follow-up to something for which they've already been seen. All others are offered this response: "We need to see you. Please set up an appointment."

**Lack of use.** Some administrative professionals simply do not believe patients will use portals. It is interesting that both this concern and the one above it are often expressed by the same people, when the truth typically lies somewhere in the middle. Not every patient will use portals, but many will, and in increasing numbers. If clinical staff encourages patients to use them when appropriate, utilization has proven to be quite high.

**Lost profits.** Some physicians and administrators are concerned that e-mail communications would discourage office visits and drive down profits. As noted above, the exact opposite occurs. Remember, Aurora Health Care was able to document new patient acquisition and increased patient loyalty.

Impacted quality of care. Others fear that clinical inaccuracies in patient-populated health records could lead to misdiagnosis and improper treatment. This concern is not unique to a patient portal because the same would be true for a patient who entered inaccurate information on a clipboard. The guidance typically offered to physicians when encountering patient-entered data is to discuss any discrepancies or questions with the patient. The end result is a more accurate patient record on both sides.

**Breaching privacy.** Another concern is nonsecure channels potentially revealing private health information and leading to HIPAA violations. Fortunately, the health systems listed above and many more have long since resolved

any HIPAA concerns with their portals. Done right, it is not an issue.

**Vying for funds and resources.** Perhaps the largest obstacle in building a patient portal is obtaining the necessary funding and resources. Patient portals can require a large financial and resource commitment, and there are often other initiatives that take priority. This may be the most serious of all concerns, and it is only overcome by more forward-thinking organizations. Portals are likely to become staples of healthcare communications, so if you allow resource issues to slow you down, you may fall behind and lose future consumers to more innovative competitors.

## Overcoming Opposition

The best way to gain support is by developing the patient portal that is right for your organization. Like any large investment, conducting your research before you jump into anything is important. By first interviewing or surveying the stakeholders who will interface with your patient portal, including patients, physicians and administrators, you identify everyone's

priorities, challenges and needs. Ask these groups which interactive options are most important to them. Unless your stakeholders really want these tools, the undertaking will be too burdensome. Ask them about their preferences regarding functionality, usability and the features they'd most like to see.

Once you've gathered this information, you now have a clear direction for your patient portal. However, don't jump into building the patient portal in its totality. Start simple with only the most important and basic features. Create a pilot program with only six to 12 physicians or practices to test the services and features. During the pilot program you should monitor response rates and test different features. Once the pilot period is over, survey patients and staff and look into the overall results to determine if it had a positive impact on your organization. How do these results compare to your initial stakeholder interviews? Factor these results into the next stage of this initiative and let them drive what enhancements you work on next.

## Development


Once you've conducted your research and implemented a pilot program, you should have enough data to develop the portal plan. It's important to gain internal consensus regarding all aspects of the initiative. A patient portal touches many areas of your organization, so you want to have people from all affected areas on board with your direction. At Aurora Health Care, it required meeting with physicians, administrators and staff at every clinic over a period of more than two years.

There is an almost overwhelming wealth of ideas when it comes to patient portals. However, all of your work up to this point will help keep you focused on the elements most important to your organization. By building off what you created for the pilot program, you can integrate the most valuable features. It makes sense to start small.

Usability is critical. How will the various forms and features function? How much access will patients have? How will they view this information? And how will physician approvals affect when information is posted to the portal? The answers to these questions will shape how your patient portal will function. Test the beta version of the portal with patients and clinical staff to ensure optimum usability.

The ideal circumstance is to have your portal mirror your consumer Web site. The experience should be seamless, otherwise some users will be confused or concerned and your results will suffer. Include important features such as usage tracking so you can conduct market research and measure results on the back-end.

Some organizations have been successful building their own portals, but if the challenge appears daunting to you, consider hiring experts to build your patient portal based on the plan you've created. Personal health information (PHI) and practice management systems must be integrated to make this process efficient and effective. This takes time and effort and may be



### Determining Success

When determining the pilot program's return on investment and on objectives take a look at both qualitative and quantitative results.

- Did this tool make communications easier and more effective?
- Did it lead to improved physician satisfaction?
- Did it lead to improved patient satisfaction?
- How did it affect staff satisfaction?
- Can you match registrations with actual patient data to determine if there was an impact on revenue?

better handled by those with experience in having done it before.

If you are already using an EHR, and your solution provider offers a Web front-end for patients, consider using that tool. If it integrates with and enables the priority applications you've identified for your portal, it can significantly speed up your time to market. That also will ensure that the proper safeguards are put in place to protect patient information and communications. Information should sit behind a user login, and the portal must support the secure sockets layer (SSL) used for encrypting data.

Lastly, it is essential to garner internal support, so your patient portal strategy should include system training and work process programs. Everyone must understand what their roles are and how to use the portal. You will put a tremendous amount of work into building a successful portal, and you want your employees to embrace the initiative and become advocates of the system who encourage use among staff, physicians and patients. The biggest failures we've seen in patient portals are not in the technology, but in the work processes and employee engagement required to support it.

With the race for creating an interactive competitive advantage underway, patient portals are becoming essential to hospitals and health systems. New technologies and innovations will continue to remove barriers to sharing information between organizations and consumers. This will create opportunities for development between patients and healthcare providers. **MHS**

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