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A Prescription For Information

By Beckie Kelly Schuerenberg
Senior Editor

A Seattle health care organization embraces new method for delivering patient education.

Prescriptions are starting to look a lot different for many people in the Northwest. In addition to the requisite pharmacist instructions, some prescriptions now have patient instructions. As usual, the physician relays to the pharmacist the various drug details; but now, some caregivers also are telling the patient where to find important information on his or her condition.

This is the heart of "information therapy," a relatively new method of support used by some in health care, including 600,000 consumers in the Washington and northern Idaho area.

They are receiving the information-based treatment from physicians at Group Health Cooperative, a Seattle-based, not-

for-profit provider and payer organization.

Patients view prescribed, physician-reviewed health care information by logging onto the organization's Web site.

Group Health Cooperative also offers patients secure, Web-based access to their health data—such as lab results—from its site, along with links to information to further help them understand diseases, conditions and more.

The organization began its information therapy initiative three years ago in an effort to break down some traditional, negative health care industry perceptions, explains James Hereford, executive director of health informatics at Group Health Cooperative.

"Many people view health care as a 'black box' operation where it's difficult for consumers to know what's going on and understand what things mean," he says. "People want to receive more information from their provider. They want information embedded into the care process."

Overwhelmed

Before it implemented the information therapy initiative, Group Health Cooperative had been overwhelmed with offers from Internet-based vendors offering to populate its Web site with health care content. Additionally, its patients were becoming confused by conflicting information they were read-



ing on various consumer-oriented health care Web sites.

The organization anticipated that patients needed such health care information but wanted to ensure the content they were reading was accurate and physician-reviewed.

So it partnered with a proven, trusted source—its medical handbook vendor—to provide the content for its Web site. The vendor's information therapy service offers updated health care content that's evidence-based and written for consumers.

But integrating this information into its care model—and getting physicians to use it when seeing patients and in e-mail correspondence with patients—is a continuing process for Group Health Cooperative, Hereford says.

"The Internet represents a way to extend the integration of health care information into patient care beyond the bricks and mortar of our facilities," he says. "And the initiative is constantly evolving because we're always reacting to new health care information."

Numerous preparations

Although Group Health Cooperative executives say the decision to use content from Boise, Idaho-based Healthwise Inc. was an easy one, the organization first had to prepare its Web site—and the new information—for its patients. Because patients would be viewing the content at the request of their physicians, the organization wanted the information to appear unique to the Group Health Cooperative site.

So I.T. staff redesigned Group Health's relatively static Web site to incorporate the new initiative and changed the site name to MyGroupHealth to reflect the patient-centered effort.

Staff also added messaging and "security applications to the site so patients could use it to access and exchange personal health information with their physicians.

On further review

Further, before uploading the vendor's 25,000 pages of health care content to its Web site, Group Health Cooperative summoned its physicians to review the information and provide feedback about its accuracy and timeliness.

The organization then revised the content to more accurately represent its practice and Web site style. It also added enhanced navigational features to the information, Hereford says.

The organization then began training physicians to use the information therapy initiative during patient exams and in e-mails to patients.

To ensure physicians would buy into the project, Group Health Cooperative hired one of their peers, Ted Eytan, M.D., to lead the training.

"The biggest part of the initiative wasn't the technology but getting physicians to engage with patients online," he says. "A big part of my role was to talk with each physician to ensure they were OK with the messaging."

Physicians initially were anxious about the information therapy, Eytan says. However, because they were asked to help review the content and how it would be

used, they enjoyed some ownership of the project and consequently became more supportive, he adds.

Group Health Cooperative's new Web site and content went live in the fall of 2000. The organization implemented the messaging application the following year.

To sign up for the application, patients must authenticate themselves on the Web site by matching their member identification number with their birth date. After they are authenticated, the Web site instructs them to choose a password.

Group Health Cooperative then mails a separate personal identification number that members must enter, along with their password, to access the messaging application. Nearly 700 patients sign up for

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the messaging application each week, Eytan reports.

Physicians also began citing information from the new Web site in their responses to e-mail messages from patients.

However, they didn't immediately begin using the information therapy in their practice. To encourage them to do so, Group Health Cooperative published a list of its most common diagnoses—and their corresponding links on the organization's Web site—on its intranet.

But because physicians didn't use the intranet during patient exams, they still had a difficult time incorporating the information therapy into their practice.

This past summer, the organization began integrating the information into applications within its new health care information system from Epic Systems Corp., Madison, Wis.

Automatic links

Now Group Health Cooperative's applications, including lab and pharmacy, automatically send test results and medication refill approvals—and links to related information on the MyGroupHealth site—to patients via the messaging application.

The organization hopes that by having the data integrated with clinical applications, physicians will further use the information therapy in their practices, Hereford says.

Such integration of health information into clinical practice is becoming more common as Web-based health care content continues to improve, contends Gary Smithson, director at New York-based Deloitte & Touche LLP.

And giving patients access to such information during an exam could help physicians receive fewer phone calls asking for further explanation, he says.

But it's not just providers using health care content in this way, he adds: Employers and payers are beginning to lead patients to approved health care information specific to their condition in an effort to keep costs down.

Empowerment

"Employers hope that by empowering their employees with user-friendly, interactive information, they can help improve their health and productivity while decreasing costs," he says. "And health plans are using such content to support their wellness and disease management programs by distributing the most current, evidence-based content to members and providers through their Web sites."

Group Health executives believe the initiative is helping the organization gain an edge over its competitors because not many institutions are offering such patient-centered information, Hereford says.

And the response physicians have received from patients shows they're grateful for such direct, focused information: Physicians receive about 800 messages each week from patients, many of which merely read "thank you," Eytan adds. •