

Communicating with Patients about Your EHR System

Open, regular communication plays a significant role in ensuring a successful EHR implementation. Many changes are being introduced to your practice as you move forward with EHR system adoption and these changes will raise anxiety levels, stimulate questions and create a fertile ground for rumors and assumptions – both internally among your practice staff as well as with your patient population. The more information related to your EHR system goals, plans and expectations that you can make available to these individuals, the more you will ease their concerns and win their confidence and support for moving forward.

Fully realizing the perspective of your patients as you move toward EHR adoption will help you in preparing and delivering effective communication to address their concerns and enlist their patience and support for the clinical disruptions ahead. You will want to consider that:

- A surprisingly large number of your patients will be apprehensive about the automation of their medical information. Concerns about security and confidentiality are very common, as are questions about how your office will be able to respond to their needs if the “computer quits working”.
- A second group of your patients will be excited about your system advancements and often have a number of questions about the technology and tools and about their own ability to begin communicating via e-mail and accessing their medical information.
- The remaining patients will, typically, remain relatively disinterested unless their appointment wait times, interaction with their physicians, or other clinical routines are disrupted during the initial weeks of Go-Live as your office works through the learning curve challenges.

The following provides some suggestions for addressing patient concerns and enlisting their enthusiasm and cooperation:

1. Tell Them What You Are Doing and Why

Your decision to select and implement an EHR system was based on excellent plans for improving your practice and many of these improvements will benefit your patients. They will be more supportive if they can understand these plans and benefits. Providing them with a short, yet informative document early in your implementation process that conveys the following information will help them understand:

- That you are implementing a new EHR system.
- How the new system will positively impact your ability to deliver quality healthcare (e.g., faster access to data/results, better coordination with hospitals/specialists, more time to spend delivering care versus processing paperwork, etc.).
- What will be done to ensure data security, confidentiality and assured access.
- What is the timeline.
- How might the transition impact them (e.g., completion of information updates, lessened appointment availability during the initial few months of “live” system use, longer appointment times while clinicians master new tools and share capabilities with patients).

For your more system savvy or more technically enthusiastic patients, you may wish to also prepare a short document that explains the key capabilities and features of your EHR system along with your plans for implementing these features within your practice. Your vendor should be able to provide you with some marketing materials to help with this communication.

2. Provide Consistent Answers to Questions and Concerns

Be sure everyone in your practice is fully informed about the specific information provided and has a prepared list of responses to anticipated and frequently asked questions (FAQs). Your practice should plan what process will be used for assuring an informed response is provided when new questions are posed to avoid well-intended but potentially confusing misinformation. An interim response of “I’m sorry, this is the first time I have been asked this question and I want to be sure I am providing an accurate answer. Can I have

designated individual call you with a response?" is usually the easiest approach followed by prompt follow-up and updates to your FAQs list.

3. Keep Them Informed on Progress

Patients will appreciate the time you take to post or communicate periodic updates to let them know how the EHR implementation is progressing. Use of progress notes, "detour" notifications (i.e., a positive way of presenting changes to plans) and countdown calendars is an easy, yet effective way to keep patients interested and informed.

4. Communicate Enthusiasm and Confidence

Change is difficult and it is likely that a number of the personnel within your practice have some apprehensions about the move to EHR. It is important to fully address this internal concern in order to assure it is not unintentionally communicated to your patients. Additionally, it is easy for stress levels to rise as training begins, procedures begin to change and the Go-Live date nears. Extra support and enthusiasm by practice leadership is needed to keep spirits high. This is often a good time to post clever posters or introduce a gimmick to lighten the atmosphere and help patients understand that everyone may not be at their best. Your vendor will often have some good materials and suggestions for this communication.

5. Include Your Patients in Your Success Celebrations

Involving patients in your incremental and final success celebrations is a great way to express appreciation for their patience and support. Even small tokens of thanks such as "I'm Electronic" stickers to celebrate paper chart success, gourmet coffee coupons to celebrate last of the late night implementation sessions, etc., show consideration and are fun for staff and patients alike.

6. Show Them the Value

Show off your new system to your patients who show interest. If you have implemented a feature that highlights some aspect of their treatment plan (e.g., a test reminder, a blood pressure trend, etc.) it is often interesting for them to share this with you. It not only shows them what you have been working on during the implementation period, it involves them more directly in understanding their healthcare status.

Informed, supportive, and enthusiastic patients are your greatest asset. Take the time to help them become EHR advocates.