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Leveraging Physician-Consumer Teamwork

By Barry P. Chaiken, M.D.

Good clinical decision support tools can improve outcomes and cut costs.



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As consumer-directed health plans become more popular, and as health care costs shift from employers to employees, consumerism—specifically, patients becoming intimately involved in directing their own care—is growing rapidly. When consumers take responsibility for spending on care and the economic risk associated with it, they start to demand product quality and information. Sources such as CMS, NCQA, Health Grades and Angie's List have exploded in popularity, while social networks using Web 2.0 technology increasingly address consumer health care issues.

However consumerism evolves, it will surely play an important role in the delivery of health care. All types of providers must plan for the dramatic shift in power as consumers apply their newfound information to obtain leverage over caregivers. Only organizations that adjust to this sea change, through innovation and emphasis on consumer issues, will survive.

The products and services that enhance the diagnostic and treatment capabilities of the physician at the point of care, while involving consumers in the management of their own care, offer health care providers a powerful tool to improve quality and reduce costs.

Effective Clinical Decision Support

Over the past decade, effective diagnostic clinical decision support tools have been developed to assist physicians in the diagnosis and treatment of disease. Unlike atlases or other online medical references, these tools are based on actual patient symptoms, so they generate a visual differential diagnosis that the physician can use immediately. Clinical decision support tools can also provide up-to-date treatment protocols reflecting the best knowledge available.

There are also a few good, Internet-based consumer sites that assist health care consumers in understanding their illness through related images and patient care information. Patients who use a complementary online patient tool obtain consumer-friendly "decision support," which often assists them in directing care. Such support tools can help patients decide whether it is necessary to visit a physician sooner in a disease life cycle, a time when treatment can be more effective and less expensive, than later, when the disease may be more difficult to treat. For patients who are uninsured or underinsured, more accurately identifying the probable cause of their skin lesion, for example, prompts them to see a physician when it is called for or to avoid unnecessary office visits or treatments.

Another benefit to these tools is that, when patients work with physicians to review images and corresponding content, the patients gain confidence in the diagnosis and the prescribed treatment.

Empowering consumers with clinical knowledge assists in the delivery of safer, more efficient care that offers higher-quality outcomes. Empowering physicians with clinical decision support is an early "win" for the physician now deploying clinic room computers. This helps them better manage available patient information and provides more accurate diagnoses and more effective treatments. Only by working together to embrace health care information technology (IT) with embedded clinical decision support can consumers and physicians positively impact health care reform in their effort to achieve better outcomes, improve access, and deliver affordable and safe care.

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