

Increase Patient Engagement and
Enhance Patient Experience Through an
Integrated Patient Portal

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Introduction

It has become second nature for consumers (patients) to flock to the Internet to communicate with friends and family. With technology advancing at an unprecedented speed, patients are demanding instant access to their medical data and healthcare providers... at any time and from any place, via laptops, tablets and smart phones. Meanwhile, on the healthcare regulatory front, things are about to change dramatically....

The Centers of Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS) adopted Meaningful Use Stage 2. These rules require providers to adopt, implement, upgrade and demonstrate Meaningful Use of certified EHR technology. Eligible providers must meet these requirements to receive MU incentive payments from Medicare and Medicaid. Providers unable to meet them are subject to reimbursement penalties starting January 2025. This challenges healthcare providers to adopt EHR technology that patients will value and use as part of their healthcare process.

To meet the requirements of Meaningful Use Stage 2, providers need to actively engage patients by providing them with the capability to electronically view, download, and transmit health information from their electronic health record. This mandate also includes the use of connections to labs, imaging centers, and state registries, along with the Direct[®] secure messaging.

 *Engaging patients and families in their health is one of the 5 “pillars” of health outcomes policy priorities. MU Stage 2 Core Measure⁷ requires that both eligible professionals (EPs) and hospitals (EHs), “Show that 5% of all patients seen in a practice or discharged from an ER/hospital during the EHR reporting period, have viewed, downloaded or transmitted to a third party, their health information.*

T*his measure is in the hands of your patients and it requires that they be engaged in order for you to meet this required Meaningful Use measure.”*
(²Norma Lopez)

For years, portal vendors have offered patient websites that to enable physicians and patients to conduct basic interaction using the Internet. These systems are often ad-hoc and not integrated into the complete practice workflow. In the ago of MU2 and Patient Engagement it is now a must to have a patient portal is directly integrated into your Electronic Heath Record (EHR) and practice management system. This will facilitate the seamless flow of information between the practice, patients and to engage patients and meet Meaningful Use Stage 2 requirements portal that is integrated into an electronic heath record (EHR) software system is a necessity to facilitate the seamless flow of information between the medical practice and portal and to meet the new Meaningful Use Stage 2 requirements.

A well-planned and designed patient portal has a myriad of additional benefits for a medical practice:

Increasing efficiencies:

- Frees staff member's time to provide patient care
- Reduces no shows with automated reminders - educates patients
- Integrates collection of copays
- Provides ease of patient payments via portal

Cost and Revenue Benefits:

- Reduces the number of office workers needed
- Increases number of patients seen
- Avoids losses due to insurance eligibility

Reputation management:

- Search Engine Optimization (SEO)
- Practice review opportunities

**Integrated
EHRs are
indeed a
powerful tool.**

Patient Portal Preferences

Before selecting an EHR with an integrated portal solution, you need to know the features that will be important to your patients. A recent survey by Software Advice released in their “[Patient Portal Preferences Report](#)” dated August 2014, found the following:

1. Only one-third of patients currently have access to a patient portal; two-thirds either do not have access or are unsure.
2. The most requested patient portal features are appointment scheduling and checking prescriptions/refills.
3. The top sources of frustration with patient portals are unresponsive staff (34 percent) and poor interfaces (33 percent).

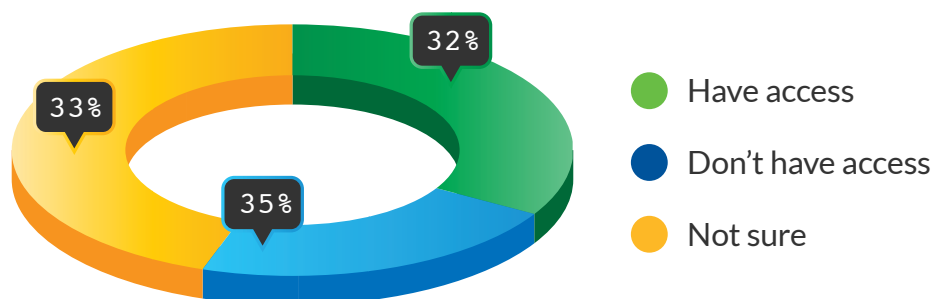
Source: ³Software Advice

Most Patients Are Unaware or Don't Have Access to a Patient Portal

According to the survey by software advice, only 1/3 of respondents claimed that they had access to a patient portal, while the remaining two-thirds did not know if their provider even offered a patient portal.

The fact that almost 67% were unaware if their provider had a patient portal should be of major concern to providers with patient portals that are integrated with their EHRs.

Respondents' Access to Patient Portal



Source: ³Software Advice

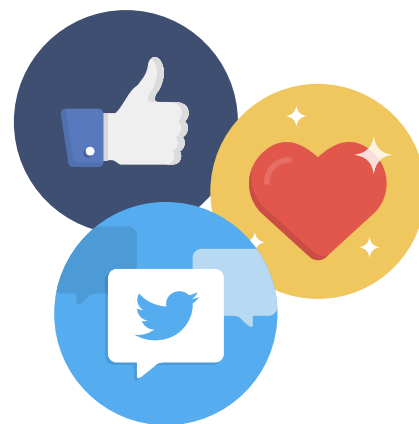
Many EHR platforms, include not only an integrated portal, but automated communication tools to facilitate patient interaction. The use of these tools can be helpful in familiarizing patients with the benefits of their own personal patient portal and contributes to patient engagement for Meaningful Use Stage 2. Examples of automated communication tools include: newsletters, appointment reminders, appointment confirmations, lab results, health maintenance reminders, new patient registration and patient education carefully selected for individual patients based on their office visit..

Patient Engagement - Portal Design Considerations

When considering an integrated PM and EMR system make sure that it comes with a full suite of patient engagement and social media tools that are intuitive, reliable and secure.

Patient Reviews & Social Media

Let's face it, social media has become an integral part of our culture. It has no age, language or cultural boundaries and your patients are using it to some degree. Patients have the ability to connect with a practice through social media. They can also submit review, ratings and comments about the healthcare services you provide on a multitude of review sites. A superior portal needs social media integration opportunities and providing patients with connections to the tools they use in everyday life. When selecting an EHR with an integrated patient portal, make sure that it comes ready with built in tools for sites like Facebook, Google+, Twitter, Vitals and HealthGrades.



Appointment Reminders & Scheduling

No shows. Just the very mention of these two words can cause a physician to wince. Automated reminders via the patient portal help to reduce no shows. According to the survey by software Advice, appointment reminders and scheduling are the most requested features by patients.

Lab Reports and Billing

The second and third most requested features by patients according to the survey by Software Advice are Lab Reports and Billing. Delivering secure test results with automated messaging or via email through a secure patient portal is efficient and cost effective.



A study examining how Kaiser Permanente increased patient registration and activity by the addition of features to their patient portal showed that registration jumped from

9 to 27 percent

when patients were allowed to view lab test results.

Member registration data from KP's member Web site – Source: ¹Anna-Lisa Silvestre

Software Advice also reported that 21 percent of patients in their study wanted to pay their medical bills directly through their patient portal. By allowing patients to pay bills online, a practice is able to receive timely payments without having to rely on expensive collections services. By utilizing automatic payment options, patients have the opportunity to view an easy to understand billing statement online through their patient portal, implementing a “soft-collection” approach via email and portal alerts.

Rx Refills and Reminders

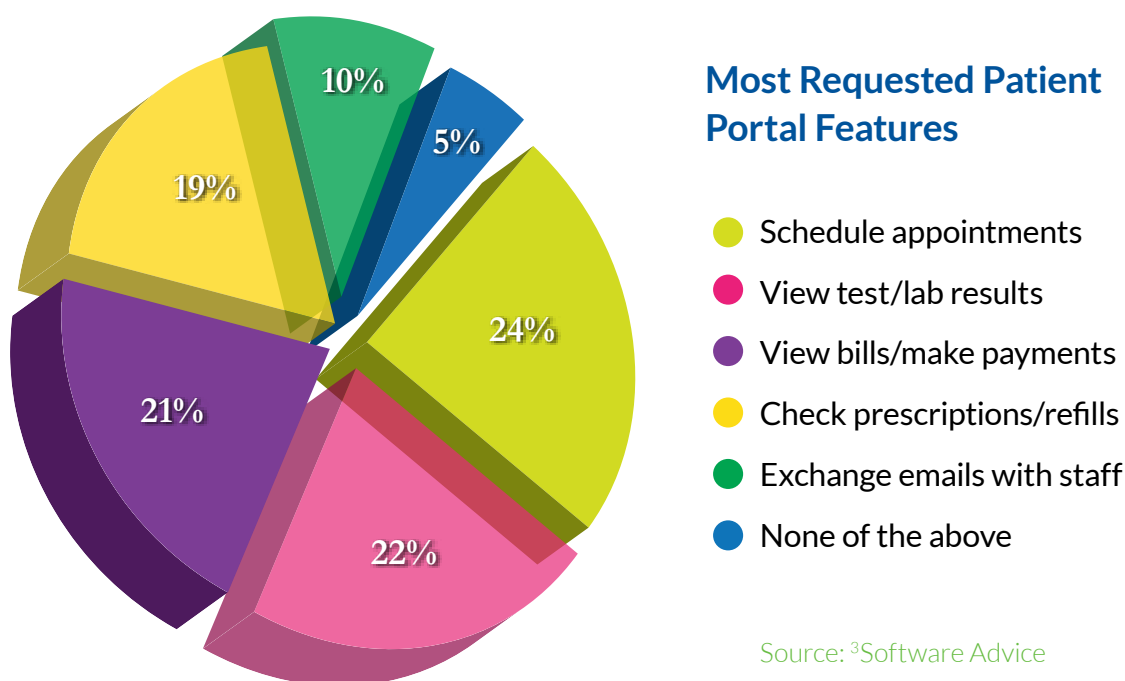
Offering patients the tools to request and check their refills online not only improves medication adherence, but also improves patient engagement. Checking prescriptions and requesting refills was favored by 19 percent of patients according to the Software Advice study.

Secure Communications

The patient portal also facilitates secure messaging between physicians, staff and patients, a capability that increases physician's and their staff's productivity immensely while also increasing patient engagement. Meaningful Use Stage 2 patient engagement rules requires 5% of all patients must securely message the practice. Patients must SEND this message. Also, 5% of all active patients must view their health records on the portal. Patients must login to the portal. Beginning in 2015, providers will get paid less on all Medicare and Medicaid claims (.5%, per year) if they are not MU compliant.

Patient Education & Patient forms

Educating and communicating with your patients are important components involved in providing the best care. When selecting an EHR with an integrated patient portal, the patient education process should be automatic and patient focused. Patients utilizing the integrated patient portal website should automatically have access to up-to-date and focused content based on their encounters. Making all practice forms available for a patient to fill out or download from the patient portal prior to a visit increases registration and patient engagement.



Patient Engagement – Marketing & Communications Planning

Selecting an EHR partner that offers a practice analysis and develops a comprehensive practice marketing and patient engagement plan is critical for success. Many companies help their clients achieve practice and patient engagement through the use of a multi-faceted marketing process.



“We start by analyzing your practice for your personal goals, your professional goals, potential opportunities and weaknesses,” says Michael Smith, Marketing Services Coordinator for WRS Health. “We analyze and report on everything from your practice web site to your patient portal to your search engine optimization. We then develop a customized and professional marketing plan for your practice tailored to your specialty.”



Some of the most effective items to include in your practice marketing plan should include:

Practice Website Development
Search Engine Optimization
Search Engine Marketing
Customized Telephone On-Hold Messaging
Customized Waiting Room Presentation
Targeted Patient Messaging (Email, SMS and Telephone)
Patient Online Review Cultivation and Management
Patient Testimonial Creation
Practice Newsletter
Marketing Plan and Content Development for Vertical Services

With a solid marketing and communications plan in place, your practice should see:

- » Increased Referrals
- » Higher Patient Retention Rates and Strengthened Patient Relationships
- » Greater Online Visibility
- » Revenue Growth
- » Rapid ROI on Marketing Spend
- » Increased Patient Engagement

Executing a Plan To Increase Patient Engagement

Once a portal and marketing plan are in place, the next step is an effective execution.

The following are **5** tips to get started.

1

Education

Communicate the importance of the practice's engagement process to your patients, providers and employees. Make them partners in the process.



2

Culture

Make patient engagement part of the organizational culture. Make it part of your vision statement, practice goals and policies.

3

Measurement Goals

The practice staff needs to have realistic goals to measure progress against. Additionally a mechanism for feedback needs to be place for both staff and patients.

4

Promotion

An integrated patient portal should come with a suite of communication and social media tools. Use them! Promote this with patients and staff.

5

Acknowledge Users

Thanking patients with a simple note for using the patient portal can go a long way to reinforcing positive behavior and encouraging continued use and engagement.



Conclusion

In order to demonstrate patient engagement to satisfy MU Stage 2 requirements, medical practices need to implement a patient engagement strategy:

- » Capitalize on technology – web reminders, appointments, refills, payments, registration, PHR
- » Encourage Communication – security, access, ease, convenience
- » Promote Awareness – market, instruct, and discuss portal with patients
- » Leverage Benefits – education, communication& marketing, cost reduction, workflow efficiency

A well-designed integrated patient portal and properly executed marketing plan can dramatically increase patient engagement.

Works Cited

¹Anna-Lisa Silvestre, Valerie M. Sue, and Jill Y. Allen. "If You Build It, Will They Come? The Kaiser Permanente Model Of Online Health Care." 2009.

²Norma Lopez, DO, MMM. "Chair, HIMSS Ambulatory Information Systems ." HIMSS Ambulatory Information Systems Committee 22 August 2013.

³Software Advice. "Patient Portal Preferences IndustryView | 2014." Software Advice 19 August 2014: 1-5.

Image Credit: Freepik.com