Launching a Hospital Patient Portal: Best Practices and Lessons Learned
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The Center for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS) set a timeline for providers that achieved meaningful use Stage 1 to attest to Stage 2 by October 2014. While CMS focused generally on electronic record-keeping in Stage 1, the agency is now requiring eligible hospitals to more effectively engage patients and securely share information. Furthermore, patients themselves are demanding faster, more comprehensive and more independent access to their own data. One way for healthcare organizations to meet these demands is to implement a health information exchange (HIE)-connected patient portal.

A one-stop portal: serving patients and providers

To better serve their patients and ultimately meet Stage 2 criteria, Main Line Health, a 10,000 plus-employee health system in suburban Philadelphia, implemented its own patient portal and went live with it in 2012. “Our ongoing goal is to create a one-stop portal for our entire health system,” said Paul Maurer, director of applications. With four acute-care hospitals, several outpatient facilities, a physical medicine and rehab hospital and a drug and alcohol treatment center, Main Line Health needed a solution that could quickly relay information from multiple points of care to thousands of patients.

When selecting a portal provider, speed and variety and, most importantly, security were Main Line Health’s main priorities. “The ability for patients to see their results while maintaining high levels of security was our initial focus,” said Troy Brailo, manager of applications and system integration. “Our interpretation of meaningful use Stage 2 is that certain information needs to be available within 36 hours.” The health system also needed to be able to consolidate and relay lab results, radiological information, cardiology tests and discharge instructions through one system. To accomplish these goals, Main Line Health selected Siemens’ MobileMD Patient Portal. “Compared to other portals, a core advantage of MobileMD is the large variety of data we can make available to our patients,” noted John Marshalek, project manager and HIE system administrator.

Finally, Main Line Health needed to be able to efficiently and securely connect its existing HIE to its new portal. One of the primary challenges the health system encountered in selecting a vendor was that there were “too many portals with too little integration,” according to Marshalek. Fortunately, Siemens’ specialization in HIE solutions differentiated it from traditional portal providers. “The advantage to having an HIE vendor as a portal vendor is that exchanging data is their core competency,” Marshalek added. “There were no challenges in getting the data we wanted in the portal to the portal.”

The critical role of an executive steering committee

Once Main Line Health partnered with Siemens, the health system had to coordinate the portal’s launch across employee and patient populations. “Due to the importance of the launch, we took an approach to form an Executive Steering Committee,” said Marshalek. The committee included representatives from every impacted area of the system.

Given the front-facing nature of the portal, the vice president of marketing led the committee as the project’s executive sponsor. In addition to its work on the portal’s branding, collateral and overall appearance, Main Line Health’s marketing department maintains the system’s website — the primary point of entry for portal users. Bill-pay, doctor look-up, donations and other non-clinical functions are kept on the public site. The physician referral contact center was trained to answer portal-related questions in real time. “We worked closely with our marketing department to ensure that our marketing

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Paul Maurer
Director of Applications

“At first, our physicians were concerned about privacy issues related to releasing any patient information through the portal, but the more we explained things to doctors, the more buy-in we got.”

The outcomes achieved by the Siemens customer described herein were achieved in the customer’s unique setting. Since there is no “typical” hospital and many variables exist, there can be no guarantee that others will achieve the same results.
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Top 5 practices for implementing a patient portal

1. Choose your teams carefully. From provisioning to marketing to executive coordination, every aspect of implementation should be spearheaded by a diverse group of employees and product experts.

2. Focus on provisioning. High patient participation requires a quick and easy provisioning process that even non-tech savvy users can navigate.

3. Get the word out. Information sharing is still a controversial topic among physicians, and system-wide buy-in will require consistent communication from start to finish.

4. Set concrete goals. Clear objectives in each stage of implementation will pave the way for effective pilot programs and long-term improvements.

5. Respond to all stakeholders. Decision-makers should prioritize changes and additions based on feedback from patients and employees alike.
Troy Brailo
Manager of Applications and System Integration

“I think the portal has specifically helped us compete in the regional healthcare market.”

Because of the complexities and customer service issues involved in these functions, Main Line Health formed another diverse core team to oversee provisioning during launch. “Once we made the decision that HIM would own the provisioning function, the team we formed for that function included the HIM director, a marketing director, a MobileMD product expert and myself, the IS project manager,” said Marshalek.

Main Line Health also created a terms and conditions document, as well as provisioning documents, in order for patients to understand that their information would now be available through another source.

Piloting MobileMD with the eligible hospital model
Main Line Health’s goal was to create a system-wide portal and achieve meaningful use Stage 2 at each of its facilities. The health system chose to pursue a crawl, walk, run strategy with an initial pilot at a system-owned practice. Following the pilot, the focus of the deployment was directed at hospital outpatients rather than on a specific group of physicians or patients. “Focusing on a geographic area implies going after specific patient populations,” said Marshalek. “The issue for us is that anyone using our health system should be using our portal.” To coordinate the launch and ensure communication between stakeholders, Main Line Health formed yet another core team, which included a representative from Patient Access, a practice’s office manager, one of its primary care physicians, a MobileMD product expert, a Marketing Director and the IS Project Manager.

The pilot and subsequent deployments have proven to be highly successful. Seventy-eight percent of Main Line Health patients who have registered for the portal have used it to track test results. “I think the portal has specifically helped us compete in the regional healthcare market,” said Brailo.

Improving performance through patient and employee feedback
Through a successful series of deployments, Main Line Health learned several lessons on how the portal can be improved for users. Patients were concerned about delayed provisioning and the inability to link family accounts. Users not well-versed in computers and internet use also found the system difficult to navigate during registration. To address these issues, Main Line Health is working to make its portal more automated, user-friendly and customizable.

Overall, Main Line Health is making continual progress on its portal. “Patients want to see results, and we’re now targeting the other areas we feel are going to get a lot of traction,” said Maurer.

About Siemens
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