



Can the Communications Highway Work for You?

Are you ready to commit to e-health? For any measure of success in this largely untested body of technology, physicians and providers must be committed to taking the plunge, even if it may mean getting wet.

WHAT A PATIENT WANTS

All indications are that consumers want to have Internet and e-mail access to physicians and medical information as part of their overall health care. Survey after survey indicates that as much as 50 percent to 75 percent of health care consumers want access to their physicians and other health information via Web site and e-mail. Some are even willing to pay for it.

However, the number of actual users remains comparatively small, with only about 5 percent of patients taking advantage of electronic health care opportunities.

To make the most of your Internet presence, examine your options from your patients' viewpoints. Features such as online registration may seem convenient at first. After all, how easy is it to spend a few minutes online filling out the same forms you would if you went to the provider in person? But, the questions and answers are not as simple as they may seem.

TAKING CARE OF BUSINESS

In the case of registration, many providers currently use brief telephone interviews to complete the necessary forms. Completing those same forms online may be more time consuming and cumbersome for many patients, especially those with dial-up Internet service or limited and/or shared access to computers at work. On the other hand, patients who work third shift or juggle careers and families during daytime working hours may appreciate taking care of this bit of business on their own time – which may not be during office hours. Examine your patients' demographics to determine which may be best for your practice. Or, offer both services to ensure registration is convenient and easy for everyone.

Simplicity must also be considered when using e-health communications. While it's true an increasing number of Americans are searching for health care information online, many (especially older adults) stick only to what they know – perhaps a few Web portals or even a limited number of specific medical sites. A complicated login or registration form may be intimidating to them. Forms should be easy to follow and request only the minimum information required to complete the task. Help in filling out the form, either via telephone or e-mail, should be readily available.

TO E-MAIL OR NOT TO E-MAIL

That is the question many providers are asking themselves. Usually the second question is what's my ROI? Charging for e-health consults may help increase your fiscal ROI, but is it the right move? And are there other ways to calculate your ROI?

According to Harris Interactive®, about 25 percent of physicians communicate online with their patients. And with e-mail consults still a fledging venture, putting a price tag on the service has been difficult. Most physicians who communicate online say they began the practice primarily because their patients requested it. That may be the best way to start in terms of who to communicate with and how much – if anything – you should charge as you initiate this part of your practice. Don't expect this to be a financial bonanza at the start. Your real ROI may come in terms of patient satisfaction and trust. Harris Interactive says that of those physicians who use remote disease monitoring, 43 percent believe they are delivering better care and 39 percent says they are improving patient satisfaction.

SAFE AND SECURE E-HEALTH

HIPAA puts a whole new focus on online health communications. Protecting patient privacy must remain a high priority when providing e-consults. Standard e-mail does not offer the protection of secure online messaging that uses authentication and encryption. If you plan to use your computer to communicate with your patients, find a provider who can ensure this level of security in your communications.

Other considerations to e-health communications include your relationship with the patient, record keeping, verification that the person you are e-mailing is really that person and appropriate consent to utilize this form of communication.

The eRisk Working Group for Healthcare, a consortium of American Medical Association leaders, other national medical societies and liability carriers, has written a comprehensive list of guidelines to online communications. You can get the complete list on its Web site at www.medem.com.

MAKE IT A GOOD FIT

Like any marketing tool, e-health communications cannot be an isolated activity. How you use the Internet in your practice should fit into the overall marketing and strategic plans for your practice. Because this area is still so new, you may experience some trials and errors. Examine every success and failure to learn from it and take another step. While e-health communications probably won't be the centerpiece of your strategic plan, it can still play an important role in enhancing care and paving the way for the future in e-health communications.

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