

Outcome Improvement – Healthcare Initiatives

People who are better informed are more able to contribute to medical decisions that will be in their best interest, reflect their needs, hold providers accountable and improve their quality of life and longevity. Now is not the time to leave anyone's future completely in the hands of others no matter how competent and qualified they may seem. It takes a team effort for health and wellness, but the individual must ultimately take ownership and responsibility. Outcome Improvement has developed a program and the tools to help make anyone's results more successful. This involves generating and sharing ideas for continuous healthcare improvements. The first step is becoming more aware and better informed.

Events are moving too fast for anyone to be totally informed. Even healthcare specialists may require a consultation with a colleague or conduct Internet research from time to time. No doctor has all the right answers or the ability to devote their undivided attention to everyone's problems. It is, therefore, important to ask questions, set expectations and monitor results. This includes helping to manage the healthcare resources used on your behalf.

The subject of medicine is highly subjective. Not everything affects everyone in the exact same way. This applies to diseases, injuries and treatments. Through necessity, we manage based upon statistical data that represent typical conditions and outcomes for the population at large. Data about members of families, ethnic groups and residents of specific geographic locales often provide a means for results to be segmented from those applicable to the general population. This helps to focus diagnosis, testing and treatments in ways that concentrate efforts where they will pay the greatest dividends, helping to avoid wasted time and money.

Technology is improving exponentially. This applies especially to medicine. All aspects of medicine are experiencing radical change. Medical research, hospital and medical groups, pharmacy chains, testing laboratories, and insurance and pharmaceutical companies are examples where explosive progress continues to improve healthcare quality and/or operating efficiencies. The replacement of paper with digital records is gradually bringing special efficiencies, quality and savings as administrative functions are being automated.

Patients on the other hand have a tendency to be left behind. They often lack complete and relevant information or the ability to make better choices and decisions to improve their own care. They seldom recognize what really makes sense or is the best choice from the multitude of options that are available. Never-the-less, they continue to pay dearly in one way or another to support a system that could be bringing them even greater benefits. We believe this shortfall is about to change and look forward to helping to increase value through our products and services.

Everyone seems to have their healthcare stories. Patients are customers, but they aren't always treated that way. For the most part, they seem to live with decisions that are made for them. Perhaps this is because they are ill-equipped to play more than limited or token roles in decision-making or at least they are perceived that way. Others think that there is a mystique around professionals who seem to prefer not to be questioned about "recommendations" that are made.

Healthcare professionals are humans that are not perfect, too. If patients really understood all of the repercussions from missed diagnoses, treatments that only work part of the time, errors and omissions and benefits that do not match the time and expense entailed, it is questionable whether they would be as passive, trusting and willing to accept *carte blanche* all that is prescribed and performed on their behalf. Like sheep, patients generally tend to do as they are told and attempt to follow directions they do not always understand or remember. Even so, they seldom rebel and accept treatments that can be costly, painful and time-consuming.

Outcome Improvement attributes this situation to a complex, rapidly changing environment. This involves a changing mixture technologies, customer needs, providers, politics and payers. Uninformed customers become overwhelmed, confused and frustrated. They assume too much; thinking that professionals are gods who put patients' interests first and foremost, using the latest and greatest technology, never making a mistake and simply working miracles on their behalf. And yes, there really is a Santa Claus.

The good, the bad and the ugly. Can we really expect medicine to be fundamentally different from any other profession? There is schooling where some do better than others. There is practice under the supervision of a mentor. Then there is a career where some continue to do over and over again what they learned with little updating of capabilities as times change. They tend to do the bare minimum; while superior performers are quick to seek out better ways to help their patients and keep copious notes about infirmities, treatments, and proactive measures.

So what should patients do? First, get referrals from friends and family who have had positive experiences. When there is a choice of who to see, ask questions including who the person taking appointments would pick. Seek out caregivers who do not have an abundance of open appointments, but are also not terribly overloaded. The former may be inexperienced or have a poor or mediocre reputation; the latter may be difficult to reach, even in an emergency and make careless mistakes. Then, as you go forward, trust, but verify, making sure that you are not settling for second string performance while thinking you are in safe hands that provide the best possible care. Finally, keep your own records to the best of your ability. You may be glad you did when your primary care physician retires and leaves you with a few cryptic notes to give to a replacement.

Avoid assumptions. Never assume that someone else is collecting everything that will be needed. Get copies of receipts, business cards, diagnostic reports, etc. whenever you can and add your own notes. Some bits and pieces of the puzzle only you can know and provide. You need to learn what they are. We are creating tools that will help you. They include digital Personal Health Records (PHR) and processes that go along with them to facilitate planning, collecting, organizing, maintaining and accessing information for emergency and routine care and treatment. Here is a brief overview of the purpose and description of a PHR. Personal experiences have shown us that having a PHR will considerably improve outcomes. The earlier in life that one is begun, the better.

Personal Health Records and their role in decision support. The information needed about an individual varies depending upon circumstances. Timing can be critical in cases of emergency

and serious illness. The sooner that decisions can be made and the right treatments begun, the better.

From a practical standpoint, information may be easier to collect and store in one way, but will need to be reported differently to facilitate use for varying purposes and individuals. This requires a broad, flexible database of information that can be organized, condensed, extracted and presented to match specific purposes and needs. Consider the following categories of applications that require information to be creatively selected, organized and presented to facilitate prompt and efficient care and improved outcomes.

- ***Emergency care*** requires essential information that is timely. This includes whether to resuscitate and prolong life, allergies, blood type, typical vital signs (blood pressure, temperature), pre-existing conditions, medications taken, who to call, and in the event of death, whether organs are to be donated.
- ***Preventative care begins with routine examination and testing*** that is important for the early recognition and care of conditions. The objective is to provide proactive measures to eliminate conditions that will gradually worsen if left untreated. Improving results from these efforts requires information that focuses attention on the most likely causes that should be looked for first. This is facilitated by family information, past medical events and environmental factors including employment, athletic activities and residences. Comparative data is important to look for trends that can be more important than single data points. More complete knowledge will likely lead to better prediction and treatment as technology improves. For children, even details of events and conditions prior to birth are of interest since early development begins in the womb.
- ***Assessment and treatment of specific conditions.*** This gets down to a case of treating symptoms or addressing root causes. How much better it is to find that an asthmatic child is living in a home full of molds and dust that can be eliminated rather than having to look forward to a life of inhalers, pills, testing and appointments. Unfortunately, things are often not that easy. Just like the automobile mechanic who changes out a series of parts trying to find out what is causing a problem, the human body can be difficult to troubleshoot when symptoms have multiple possible causes. Medical research is helping to narrow the choices as well as to provide better treatments. However, Personal Health Records with active involvement by the patient will continue to improve the matching of care with the individual's uniqueness.

A formidable task? Creating and maintaining a Personal Health Record sounds like a formidable task. It can be, especially if it needs to be done for a family that includes children and elderly members who cannot help with their own. Practically speaking, don't expect perfection and completeness. Do the work gradually. Make it a family project that is tackled a little at a time on a regular basis along with a regimen of exercise, healthy eating and regular checkups. This requires a schedule. Otherwise, my experience has shown that things like this never seem to happen.

Paradigm shifts are producing a revolution in healthcare. Why should healthcare be different from anything else? Technology at times appears to be making life more complicated. We are

overloaded with too many things to think about from mass emails to entertainment alternatives to interruptions of all sorts. Yet, computers with more and more power are also taking over more routine, mundane tasks drastically reducing overload. Then new sources of overload occur as technology brings more ways to improve and enrich every aspect of our lives. Progress is reported every day from replacement hearts to better treatments. Sophisticated, computer-powered testing will identify diseases in early stages and personalized treatments will provide more optimal results.

We must formulate expectations and help drive change. The process for building machine intelligence into our daily processes and procedures requires effort. We are customers that must be satisfied, but we need to help by deciding what we want, what is important to us and then communicating with those working to make improvements. We can create smart systems that will link PHR data to better automatic healthcare outcomes, but first, we must experience the frustrations of a manual world and work out the bugs before processes can be successfully automated.

Automatic healthcare outcomes won't happen immediately. However, we have little doubt that the cumbersome PHR will evolve into a Personal Health Assistant that will automatically collect information, identify deficiencies and guide tests, recommendations and treatments with little or no human intervention. The result will be increased longevity and quality of life with greater cost-effectiveness and value with optimum use of funds and physical resources.

Our role is to facilitate the processes behind change. It takes planning, analysis, collaboration, teamwork, management and a multitude of creative skills to make progress and for momentum to continue. Our background and experience can prove essential in your Outcome Improvement. We help to minimize the pain before the gain.

To learn how we can help you, please contact us.

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