The Most Important Healthcare Job You've Never Heard Of

How Patient Navigation Can Improve Health Outcomes

High performance. Delivered.

What if there was a healthcare solution that paid for itself in just two months while delivering significant health and performance outcomes for an entire year? There is. But you've likely never heard of it.

A game-changing role ideal for today's healthcare reform climate, patient navigation is poised to become a household word over the next decade, providing meaningful careers to put people back to work and transforming healthcare at a time when both are desperately needed.

A view from the field

Assisting provider and payer organizations—especially those serving Medicaid populations—to develop patient navigation programs and train patient navigators, Accenture is seeing the impact first hand. Large Medicaid providers and some hospitals are using patient navigation for their highest-risk patients with diseases such as cancer, diabetes and sickle cell anemia. Medicaid and other payers are looking to patient navigators to help chronic disease populations understand their healthcare options. What can result is improved quality, reduced costs, optimized resources and revenue, and better patient and care team satisfaction.

Consider the story of a regional medical center primarily serving Medicaid patients. To address the high cost in health outcomes, wasted resources and lost revenue associated with missed radiation appointments for head and neck cancers, the hospital began a patient navigation program to help patients keep their appointments. Trending data indicate that

not only did the service pay for itself in just over two months; overall appointment no-show and cancellation rates dropped from just over 11 percent to 8.36 percent as a result of this intervention. A similar program at a renowned academic medical center shows the same trend.

Patient navigation is also a timely healthcare solution for the Medicaid environment. As states expand Medicaid rolls as a result of the Affordable Care Act, patient navigation can support the legislation's focus. Take the example of prenatal care. Today, Medicaid pays for approximately 40 percent of all births in this country.[1] Studies show that women enrolled in Medicaid are less likely than other women to receive first trimester prenatal care.[2] Patient navigators can increase these women's care access, which can lead to better outcomes for them and reduced Medicaid costs.[3] Clearly, patient navigation can make a difference, but what is it exactly—and why is it so important?

[1] http://www.hhs.gov/news/press/2011pres/02/20110203tech.html

[2] http://www.mchb.hrsa.gov/whusa11/hsu/pages/313qwhc.html

[3] http://linn.ia.networkofcare.org/ph/model-practice-detail.aspx?pid=597

An environment that must change

Patient navigation was named a top career for the next decade because of its potential to provide job security, job growth and meaningful work.[4] Considering the state of healthcare today, it's easy to see why. Complexity and fragmentation have created disparities in timely access to quality healthcare among underserved groups. Costs are skyrocketing. Uninsured populations are rising. Healthcare reform is pressing for new programs such as Medicaid expansion and accountable care organizations. The status quo is not sustainable. The goal must be to reduce medical spending for the under-insured while delivering better healthcare and bottom-line performance.

Clearing the way for better outcomes

Patient navigation is a powerful means to this end. It originated in Dr. Harold Freeman's work over two decades ago to improve cancer mortality rates among disadvantaged populations in Harlem. With patient navigation and access to screening, the Harlem Hospital Center saw five-year survival rates in breast cancer increase from 39 to 70 percent.[5]

Patient navigation is rooted in a simple premise. If barriers to timely healthcare access are eliminated, and patients are supported throughout the healthcare continuum, healthcare outcomes will improve. These barriers are often broader than most realize. They include more commonly discussed issues such as financial constraints and lack of medical insurance. Yet they also include less obvious, but equally paralyzing, factors. These are the emotional, cultural, communication and logistical barriers that cause people to disengage from the healthcare system, neglecting preventive care or chronic disease treatment. Simply put, the best healthcare advances mean nothing if a patient misses her appointments because she doesn't have a ride or a babysitter.

The importance of a non-clinical focus

Patient navigators are not necessarily clinically trained, but as defined by the Harold P. Freeman Patient Navigation Institute, they are trained to provide "one-on-one guidance, support, education, referrals, coordination of care, and other assistance to patients" at every step of the healthcare journey. A cost-effective resource for community or payer organizations, provider facilities, in at-home care settings, and organizations serving Medicaid populations, lay patient navigators can connect the care team around the patient and augment the work of physicians, nurses, care managers and social workers. They can help to:

- Improve quality of care.
- Reduce no show rates.
- Reduce emergency room utilization.
- Increase Medicaid enrollment.
- Increase patient satisfaction.
- Increase physician and nurse satisfaction.

By focusing on necessary but non-clinical tasks, patient navigators reduce the burden of overwork and help improve quality of care while driving more rapid movement through the healthcare system, generating revenue and saving money via new efficiencies.

Making a difference for everyone

The patient navigation role has widespread resonance. For disadvantaged patients, patient navigators forge person-to-person connections on a patient's own terms—connections that have historically been missing for many. For the healthcare community, patient navigators are a lower cost investment that delivers much-needed health and business outcomes. For communities, patient navigation provides opportunities to put unemployed people or retirees who want to make a difference back to work in a growing sector while improving health quality and access for many.

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[4] http://www.kiplinger.com/columns/onthejob/archive/13-careers-for-the-next-decade.html

[5] Harold P. Freeman, MD and Rian L. Rodriguez, MPH, History and Principles of Patient Navigation, Cancer, August 1, 2011.

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