③ Solutions to Connect Patients with Family and Friends

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In this unprecedented time of social distancing, visitor restrictions and shelter-in-place orders, health systems are using technology to connect patients with their loved ones who may be miles away. Strong patient and family engagement is not only critical for the patient's well-being, but also for improved health outcomes, reduced costs and favorable patient experience.[1]

In addition, family members and caretakers are experiencing heightened anxiety around the care of their loved ones. Technology can help them feel empowered and part of their loved one's care journey even from a distance, increasing their overall satisfaction and reducing anxiety during this challenging time.

Despite the clear benefits, there can be hurdles to offering this type of technology. With strained resources and the need for technology to be quickly deployed, what solutions can health systems utilize?

This guide explores 3 proven solutions that are being used in health systems to connect patients with loved ones during this time of crisis.

① Mobile Video Technology

Health systems need to look no further than the palm of a hand to connect patients with caretakers. Technology like FaceTime is successfully being used to connect patients with their loved ones. COVID-19 is impacting seniors at a higher rate than younger patients. While seniors' adoption of mobile technology has increased rapidly, not everyone is fully equipped with the technology or has the knowledge of the capabilities available.

Hospitals can enable facility iPads with FaceTime and video chat capabilities to facilitate quality engagements for their patients. Video chat can help reduce the risk of depression in people aged 60 and older, a group that is more likely to be socially isolated than younger people, according to a study by the Oregon Health and Science University's School of Medicine.[2] Further, video chat was found to be more effective than other communication mediums including email, social media and instant messaging.

② Messaging and Image Sharing

During times of high stress and anxiety, visual technology is especially important when sharing critical health-related information. Visuals shared through patient portals and other tools that include pictures, drawings, charts and graphs are effective tools for communicating health information, according to the CDC[3]. Further, according to the CDC, "visuals can make the presentation of complex information easier to comprehend, more attractive, and can also reinforce written or spoken health messages." During this time of often-conflicting information and heightened concern, visual communication helps to ensure the audience will understand and remember the important information provided by the medical team. They can reference the material whenever they need a reminder, lowering the number of future calls and questions.

3 Mobile App Technology

One of the most powerful technology solutions are mobile apps that can connect providers, patients and family members in a HIPAA-compliant manner. Apps can provide the technology highlighted in the strategies noted above all in one place. Ideal patient engagement apps show patient progress in real time, allowing the patient to set goals that are important to them and enable caregivers to provide encouragement. This helps ensure that the patient, clinical team and family are all on the same page, even if not in the same location. It also supports shared goal-setting and lets everyone feel like they are a valuable part of the care process.

An example of technology that is bringing many of these strategies together is PORT's RehabTracker mobile app, which enables providers to work with the patient to set and track rehab goals in real time. Providers can share images and messages with invited family and friends and loved ones can provide messages of encouragement through the app, all of which are invaluable on the patient's road to recovery. The app has been utilized across the country and has been found to improve outcomes and increase patient engagement.

For instance, acute rehabilitation unit's patients have recorded gains in self-care, mobility and communications, while their returns to acute care dropped from 3.9% to 1.1% over a three-month period when RehabTracker was introduced.

1. Rainie L, Perrin A. 10 Facts About Smartphones as the iPhone Turns 10. Pew Research Center, June 28, 2017. http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/06/28/10-facts-about-smartphones/

2. Alan Teo, Oregon Health and Science University's School of Medicine https://news.ohsu.edu/2018/11/19/releases-20181119

3. https://www.cdc.gov/healthliteracy/developmaterials/visual-communication.html

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