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RESEARCH BRIEF

Empowering Patients



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Empowering Patients

Timely health information enhances wellness



Everyone with an illness, injury, or health condition should receive consistent, evidence-based messaging from their doctor, recovery specialist, and case manager from the moment of diagnosis. But in a media-saturated world, it can be difficult for patients to find accurate and reputable information that is keeping pace with the latest scientific recommendations.

The first place most people look for health information is the internet, and 30% to 50% of patients run searches on their symptoms before they ever see a doctor.¹⁻³ Because patients don't inherently know which websites are

Access to reliable medical information can empower patients to be active participants in their recovery.

trustworthy, there is concern among health experts that internet searching may hinder appropriate care. Nurses have reported an uptick in time spent dispelling inaccurate information during patient visits.⁴ Physicians have reported that a majority of their patients are misguided, confused, or misinformed by reports they have found.⁵ Well-publicized reports of violence toward healthcare workers have been observed to stem from miscommunications.⁶ However, one study found that when shared decision-making and patient empowerment are the norm, "Dr. Google" has a generally positive contribution to the doctor-patient relationship.⁷ This finding may reflect the wish many patients have to be active participants in their care and have meaningful conversations with their clinicians. Care managers, physicians, and healthcare systems need to prepare for this trend with adequate training and resources.⁸

Clinicians and case managers can proactively harness patients' interest in self-care and condition management by directing them to evidence-based patient education materials at the outset. Providing patients with accurate knowledge from a reliable source can reduce health anxiety, promote self-advocacy, and encourage ownership of the care and maintenance of their own condition. These materials can also help patients know what questions to ask. The benefits of well-informed patients enhance the healthcare experience in many ways:

- Setting expectations for the care and recovery timeline improves outcomes and bolsters patient confidence in the medical staff
- Information that is accessible for patients and caregivers to review at home results in better patient compliance
- Decreased time discussing unrelated treatment options and disinformation promotes focus on the patient's individual care needs
- Clear messaging protects the healthcare team from patient violence and abuse that can arise from conflicting information and unrealistic expectations
- Educated patients are better positioned to engage support when implementing treatment-mediated lifestyle choices

Sensible solutions

The rising costs of medical care coupled with staffing shortages have pushed the healthcare system toward embracing a patient-centric, shared decision-making model that leverages patient participation in diagnosis, treatment, and recovery. This model involves conversations between the clinician, healthcare staff, and patient about care options, with clinicians providing their medical expertise and patients bringing their individual social and emotional contexts to the discussion.⁹

Adopting this model may require changing the format of patient-clinician appointments to allow time to discuss the good, the bad, and the inaccurate information that patients may have discovered, as well as time to guide the patient to reputable sources. This compassionate and collaborative approach may have even more benefits by improving patient satisfaction, creating culturally suitable care, and decreasing violence toward clinicians.¹⁰

Research has continued to validate the truth in the idiom “mind over matter” by demonstrating that recovery expectations set either before or early on during the treatment continuum can affect outcomes positively over a wide variety of conditions and procedures including low back pain,¹¹ surgical interventions,¹² traumatic brain injury,¹³ and most medical disorders where people are trying to return to their usual activities and work.¹⁴ Inviting patients to take part in personal health decision-making can also improve treatment compliance and self-management of chronic conditions such as diabetes, heart failure, kidney disease, and mental health disorders, enhancing physical and psychological health status.¹⁵

Barriers & opportunities

Not all patients, however, want to oversee their own care, and some prefer to follow instructions from health professionals without deeper insight. Further, the

understanding of medical terminology varies greatly across age groups, education levels, socioeconomic status, and more. It is the responsibility of all clinicians and care managers to clearly communicate health information effectively at each patient’s level of comfort. Patients without a basic understanding of their condition may not seek clarifications or be able to engage in useful self-management, which may lead to worse outcomes. In a study of people with heart failure, it was found that 1 in 4 patients had inadequate or marginal health literacy, which was associated with higher rates of hospitalizations, emergency department visits, and mortality.¹⁶

Access is another barrier that should be addressed when designing a patient education program. Not all patients have smartphones or computers linked to the internet, and not everyone can effectively access the content even when it is available. For example, downloading an app, creating a login, and navigating to a patient portal may be too complex for some and too inconvenient for others. Websites themselves may display small fonts, poor

Empowering patients to learn more about their condition not only helps them engage in meaningful conversations with their healthcare providers but also smooths recovery.



contrast, or confusing navigation. Illustrations with detailed medical labeling may be beneficial for some but deter others. Some patients may respond best to written content or a simple checklist of Do's and Don'ts, whereas others may prefer watching an embedded video. It is important to consider the audience to maximize impact.

Structured options

Patients and their caregivers want timely information they can use to plan and manage the mental and physical aspects of recovery. A study of surgical patients found that educational efforts increased patients' confidence to work with their healthcare team on proactive involvement.¹² This messaging must reinforce the same themes so that patients learn consistent instructions for recovery from their entire care team. But connecting clinicians, case managers, and employers on behalf of the patient is a time-consuming, ongoing issue that often needs systematic interventions.

An example of creatively adjusting appointments to include a patient education component was done by a clinic that outsourced their patient education to second-year medical students. They added 45 minutes of patient education time to three traditional 15-minute clinic visits, and found that the program significantly improved patients' ability to self-manage their chronic conditions while also enhancing the students' education.¹⁷

Inviting patients to take part in personal health decision-making can help patients set expectations for their recoveries and improve treatment compliance. In a systematic review of patients with chronic conditions such as diabetes, heart failure, kidney disease, and mental health disorders, individualized care planning that included proactive patient education and a shared decision-making model resulted in better self-management and improved health status.¹⁵ No matter how it is structured, it is imperative that educational materials are integrated into the appointment workflow so that their delivery does not involve extra work for clinicians and patients have easy access to them at home.

Guiding patients to timely, reliable medical information from reputable sources is a necessity that helps patients make informed decisions about their care, and their lives. Empowering patients to learn more about their illnesses, injuries, surgeries, or chronic conditions not only helps them engage in meaningful conversations with their healthcare providers but also smooths recovery. Patients thus encouraged are more likely to take ownership of the care, recovery, and successful management of their conditions, leading to better outcomes.

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