

Putting the Patient Front and Center

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With healthcare at the center of the national debate, much attention has been focused on universal mandates, patient safety, evidenced-based quality care, population health, integrated and accountable health systems, and rewarding value rather than volume. Potentially lost in this conversation is what this all means to today's "patient" and - hopefully - tomorrow's "health consumer."

Over ten years ago, the Institute of Medicine called for a 21st Century Health System redesigned around "high performing patient-centered teams" to deliver safe, effective, efficient, personalized, timely, and equitable health outcomes.¹ The report proposed a system of care that was customized according to patient needs and values and capable of responding to individual patient choices and preferences. The IOM viewed the patient as the source of control providing he or she was given the necessary information and the opportunity to exercise choice over healthcare decisions.²

While great strides have been made in improving quality and safety, leaders and practitioners committed to "patient-centered" health continue to fall short on their delivery. Too many consumers continue to view their experiences with the system as impersonal, fragmented, and increasingly complicated. Future health leaders must understand this and be open to new thinking about the role of consumers as they lead multi-professional teams committed to providing personalized patient service.

The Opportunity

Consumers now have access to a myriad of tools that allow them to become more informed in all aspects of their health. Yet navigating the system remains much too complicated. Web based information, comparative outcomes research, expert guidelines, patient controlled medical records, and access to drugs and technologies to promote wellness and a healthy lifestyle create substantive opportunities for enhanced engagement of patients on their own health and disease management. Thus, consumers remain one of healthcare's greatest untapped resources in designing the health system of the future.

¹ Institute of Medicine – "Crossing the Quality Chasm: A New Health System for the 21st Century," released March 1, 2001

² Institute of Medicine – "Crossing the Quality Chasm: A New Health System for the 21st Century," pages 3-4

Leadership and practitioners must become more outwardly focused on listening and responding to their patients and preparing them to better manage and control their individual healthcare needs. To paraphrase Albert Schweitzer, M.D., *we are at our best as clinicians when we put the doctor inside of each patient to work.*

Population health and patient-centered care are two sides of the same coin: providing personalized care through integrating evidence-based practice with a patient's personal values and preferences. This customized partnership requires an informed and empowered consumer as well as a fully engaged healthcare team that adopts principles of shared decision making, active listening, and application of evidence-based practices combined with an intimate personal knowledge of the patient.

Dr. Marie Savard refers to these empowered patients as “patient power pioneers” in her recent books, and she identifies a number of elements critical to integrating personalized health empowerment into the design of a future health system.³

- **Trust the doctor within:** Often patients have an intuitive feeling that something is wrong but never seek help because they are afraid of being considered pushy, or are intimidated by doctors and other health professionals. That said, research has shown that patients often know more than they think they do about their health. For example, researchers at Purdue University tracked patients and their doctors for many years, asking them to rate their health. In every case, the patient's own report was as accurate, or even more accurate, than the physician's. In the words of Sir William Osler, “Listen to the patient. He is telling you the diagnosis.”
- **Provide a Personal Health Record:** Information in one's medical record is arguably the most private and important information there is. The simple act of giving patients their records does more to actively involve them in the healthcare process than almost any other activity. Despite advances in the EMR adoption, medical records remain piecemeal in an array of offices, computers, laboratories, and hospitals. Patients who are given a copy of their medical records become more confident in their own actions, more compliant with medical regimens, and feel more in control of their healthcare. Likewise they become more involved in the medical decision making process, ask more questions, and understand more fully their conditions and proposed treatments.

³ *How To Save Your Own Life, The Savard System for Managing and Controlling Your Health Care* (Warner Books, 2000) and *The Savard Health Record* (Time Life, Inc. 2000)

- **Encourage Researching Medical Conditions and Treatment Options:** Patients should be encouraged and taught how to research and evaluate available medical information. When diagnosed with a chronic condition or prescribed a new medication or treatment, patients should be encouraged to become as informed as possible about all aspects of the condition, medication, and proposed treatment.
- **Create a Healthcare Team Partnership:** Participating fully in one's healthcare requires a partnership between the healthcare team (often including a nurse, physician, and pharmacist) and patient. According to the work of Braddock⁴, doctor and patient discussions about routine clinical decisions are common in practice but rarely include real substance. It is evident that both patients and doctors need to improve their communication with each other.

The Leadership Imperative

With the research demonstrating the importance of greater patient involvement in their care, more leadership attention must be focused on designing and implementing new clinical climates, systems, and tools that support the achievement of this important goal.

From the Boardroom to the front line, we have found that the emerging leaders best suited to this undertaking:

- Challenge the status quo, and think outwardly and horizontally across traditional boundaries and bricks and mortar.
- Are more integrative thinkers who connect the dots and consider interdependent and less linear opportunities and relationships within an evolving health system.
- Have the ability to use data, technology and evidence to envision and design new care experiences and services in which patients and health consumers can more fully participate.
- Are confident in their own competency and ability, yet remain open to fully listening to patients and consumers to identify ways to address their underlying needs.
- Feel comfortable leading a team where shared dialogue and decision making will promote new combinations of services, products, and networks designed to best serve the longitudinal needs of future health consumers.

⁴ Braddock CH, Fihn SD et al., *How Doctors and Patients Discuss Routine Clinical Decisions: Informed Decision Making in the Outpatient Setting*. J Gen Intern Med 1997;12:339-345.

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