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WISCONSIN DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH SERVICES

Health IT Tips: Overcoming the Digital Divide

Health information technology (IT), like patient portals, secure messages, and mobile health apps, can help Wisconsinites become engaged health care consumers. Increasingly, people are using technology to manage information about their health and actively partner with health care providers to make decisions—but that is not the case for everyone.

Health Care Providers: **Dispel** common myths about disparities in health IT use. **Learn** how YOU can help bridge gaps in patient engagement.

Take Action: Helping Your Patients Use Health IT

You can create a culture of patient engagement by making sure health IT use is encouraged by all members of your practice throughout the care experience. Front office staff can educate patients who call for appointments about the opportunity to book online and use tablets or kiosks to facilitate sign-ups in the waiting room or an adjacent private area. Nurses and care managers can provide information during or following an appointment, and physicians can develop talking points to explain the benefits of health IT during the visit. You may also be able to help your patients receive a free smartphone through their Medicaid health plan or the federal Lifeline program.[1]

Background

Federal research shows disparities in patient use of health IT across sociodemographics, with lower income, less educated, and minority groups less likely to access their information.[2] In addition, providers working in small groups and rural or high poverty areas often struggle to get their patients to access health information online.

While some people are accessing their records at lower rates than others, findings indicate that a population's lack of access, also known as a "digital divide," may not be the core issue.[3] More often, it is a lack of awareness that online resources exist and that these tools can help improve health.[4] To maximize your practice's return on technology investments and improve care quality, learn the truth about patient health IT use.

Dispelling Common Myths

MYTH 1: Engaging patients with health IT is not worth the time because it does not help improve outcomes.

- **Eight in 10** people who access their health record online consider the information useful (with no significant difference by age, race or ethnicity, or education).[5]
- **When patients use patient portals, they are 2.6 times more likely to choose to stay a patient of a practice.**[6] Clearly, it is in the best interest of both patients and practices to increase portal access and use.

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"The patients are very pleased to have access to their personal health information and to have direct contact with the health care providers. In the long run, we confidently believe that the personal health record and secure messaging will improve the patient-provider health care experience."

– Comment from a Wisconsin health center

- Electronic access to health information is important because it empowers patients to manage their health and care. The most common uses are to **monitor chronic conditions, better adhere to treatment plans, and find and fix errors in records**, all of which can affect health outcomes.[7]

MYTH 2: Medicaid members won't benefit from our office putting health information online.

- With over 80% of low-income consumers now accessing the internet, the digital divide is quickly being erased.[8]
- Importantly, **when underserved people access their health information online, they tend to benefit more than others** because low-income consumers have been harder to serve in traditional care models (for example, face-to-face care during typical working hours).[9]

MYTH 3: If patients are not using health information electronically, there is nothing that can be done.

- The primary reason individuals do not access online health records is a lack of perceived need for information, not difficulties accessing or using the web.[10]
- **Patients are nearly twice as likely to access their medical record when they are encouraged to do so by their provider,** meaning clinicians have the opportunity to improve engagement by explaining the value of health IT.[11]

References

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