

Improve Your HCAHPS Scores with Simple Technology Upgrades

As more hospitals transition to value over volume, investments in integrated visual displays are proving to enhance patient satisfaction.



Healthcare organizations are always on the lookout for tried and true ways to improve the patient experience. And for good reason: Higher scores on patient experience metrics, including the Hospital Consumer Assessment of Healthcare Providers and Systems (HCAHPS), are linked to better profitability. As noted in a 2016 Deloitte survey, a strong, positive correlation exists between patient experience and financial performance, even when controlling for other factors that may influence a hospital's financial standing.¹

Joni Padden, Nursing Informatics Specialist at Texas Health Resources, said her organization, like many large health systems across the country, is now prioritizing patient experience, looking for creative innovations that can increase each patient's satisfaction and engagement with his or her care.

"Patient experience now tops the list of the things we think about when we consider making improvements or investing in information technology (IT) solutions," she explained. "There are so many things that go into patient experience: safe care, appropriate care, and the cost of care are there, of course. But finding ways to effectively communicate with patients is something that is really important and something we see can affect HCAHPS scores."

The HCAHPS questionnaire asks patients to rate their hospital stay in 27 different categories, ranging from the cleanliness of the facility to the patient's willingness to recommend the facility to another. But the vast majority of questions inquire about aspects of patient-provider communication — how well patients interacted with nurses, doctors, and other clinical staff members; the responsiveness of hospital staff to questions and requests; and how well discharge information was communicated when it was time for patients to head home (Figure 1). Stan Swiderski, Strategic Healthcare Account Manager at NEC Display Solutions, said these are all areas where some simple technology upgrades, including unique display solutions, can help.



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STAN SWIDERSKI | STRATEGIC HEALTHCARE ACCOUNT MANAGER | NEC DISPLAY SOLUTIONS

"So many of these important issues are based on simple communication," he said. "It's making sure that a patient knows what's going on, can communicate with staff, and get questions answered. When you consider value-based purchasing penalties have reached 2%, of which 1/2% is purely HCAHPS, a hospital with \$200 million in Medicare revenue faces \$1,000,000 on the line based solely on HCAHPS performance every single year, improving HCAHPS should be a priority. Especially because these are all things that can be fairly easily addressed with innovative signage and visual displays."

Patient communication

Texas Health Resources has worked hard to improve communication across the health system in a variety of ways, according to Padden. A pilot program that uses kiosks for the system's breast centers check-in process has been very well received, she said.

"You come in to get your mammogram done, and you can check in right at the kiosk and answer any questions that need to be answered — patients don't even have to stop at the front desk if they don't want to," she said. "The feedback has been so positive that we are in the process of growing the program."

Swiderski said technology that can upgrade point-of-care tools such as digital check-in are increasing in popularity. Many people want their hospital check-in to be as easy as online shopping. Visual displays can offer information on patient progress, and status updates are also a sound investment when enhancing the patient experience, according to Swiderski. Padden agreed — and even shared her own story of how the addition of one of these communication devices could change the experience for waiting family members.

Last fall, Padden had cataract surgery at a Texas Health facility. "My sister was waiting for me and said she really appreciated the large display in the waiting room that let her know, by a unique identifying number, where I was in the process," she said. "She could follow my progress from preoperative to when I was coming out of the operating room."

Yet, just a few months later, when Padden's sister took her boss to have the same procedure performed at a different facility, her sister reported a disappointing experience. "That facility did not have that kind of technology," Padden said. "She felt as if she was not informed. She felt as if the surgery took a lot longer. And that really changed the way she saw the care that was performed there. It really changed her perception."

Swiderski is not surprised. "Patient satisfaction, so often, really is just about making patients and their families feel that they know what's happening and that they haven't been forgotten," he said. "But waiting rooms are not the only place where you can put up displays that can do that. There are other opportunities to enhance communication to make patients feel more involved in the process."

New communication points

One solution that can have direct bearing on a patient's satisfaction level — and corresponding HCAHPS scores — is an interactive in-room whiteboard. Today, most hospital rooms have a traditional whiteboard hanging on the wall. Nurses will write pertinent information about the hospital stay, including items such as a patient's allergies and the name of the nurse currently on shift, on the board for the patient's convenience. Unfortunately, Swiderski said, in the hustle and bustle of providing care, these whiteboards are not always kept up to date, which can be frustrating for patients who read an allergy listed from the last patient who occupied that bed, or see the nurse's name from the day before.

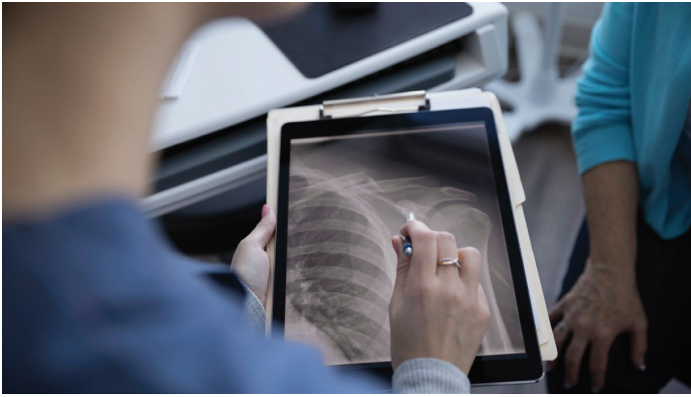
"New technologies allow these electronic whiteboards to be automatically updated based on electronic health records so that clinicians can immediately see if the person has an allergy or is a fall risk," he said. "But it can also be linked to scheduling changes. So, when the shift changes, which can happen when a patient is sleeping or out for a test, the whiteboard will change the names of the attending nurse and physician, keeping the patient in the loop. If the patient isn't an English speaker, it can also easily be switched to his or her native language so that the patient can better understand the information there."

Nurses love the electronic whiteboards because handwritten whiteboard updates are one less task required during their shifts, according to Swiderski. But, he said, patients also appreciate having that source of accurate information right in the room — especially since most of these whiteboards can also tie into the central nursing station, where the nurses monitor all the patient beds, and which can transmit silent messages to individual patients, when necessary, helping to maintain quiet in the room while communicating pertinent information. There are numerous opportunities to link the nursing station to other forms of signage.

"There can be a digital doorway sign, right outside the room, that lets the staff know that the patient is scheduled for surgery the next day and shouldn't be given a meal," he pointed out. "Giving patients food before surgery is a very common problem that can cost hospitals a lot of money because surgeries then must be postponed and hospital stays extended."

FIGURE 1: THE CAUSE-AND-EFFECT FLOW TO HCAHPS





This common problem, however, can also significantly lower patient satisfaction. Patients don't want to be compelled to tell the hospital that they are on a restricted diet or, to eat a meal accidentally when they shouldn't because they assumed, wrongly, that the hospital was keeping track of their schedule. And they certainly don't want to extend their stay in the hospital for another few days because they ate that meal.

"It may seem like a little thing," said Swiderski. "But this is a simple solution to a common problem. When you can do something that improves communication and streamlines care coordination, you get better patient outcomes. You also provide a better patient experience."

Investing in patient satisfaction

As hospitals and health systems look for creative ways to improve the patient experience — and recoup those much-needed reimbursement dollars in the process — many may overlook a technology as simple as high-resolution visual displays. With so many opportunities to solve the little frustrations that can prompt lower HCAHPS scores, this oversight is a cardinal mistake, according to Swiderski. Today's technological advances make it easier than ever for healthcare organizations to securely and seamlessly share information with patients and their families in a variety of different contexts.

"Human interaction with patients will always be important, but, more often than you'd think, you can get the basics out of the way with the right visual display," he said. "Effective visual displays can help patients and their families better navigate the hospital, make waiting rooms more attractive, coordinate care across providers, and give up-to-the-minute updates on patient progress. These are all investments that will pay for themselves over time."

References

¹ Deloitte, "The Value of Patient Experience: Hospitals with Better Patient-Reported Experience Perform Better Financially," 2016, <https://www2.deloitte.com/content/dam/Deloitte/us/Documents/life-sciences-health-care/us-dchs-the-value-of-patient-experience.pdf>.

They can also bolster patient engagement, he added, helping patients feel more empowered to assist with their own healthcare. Padden agreed. "There are a lot of flexible and creative ways to improve communication with patients," she said. "Putting up a display may seem like a simple thing. But it's a simple thing that allows you to provide the kind of communication that assists staff, patients, and family in finding the information they need when they need it. When you can do that, you really are in a better position to improve a patient's care experience."

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