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A single, complete touch: Population health, the health contact center, and the patient experience

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Abstract

As healthcare organizations turn to population health in order to more effectively manage the health and well-being of their patients, many need to ensure that these new strategies include a directive to improve the patient experience. Fortunately, healthcare systems can turn to an existing entity within its ranks, the health contact center, in order to execute a successful strategy and ensure that the individual patient never feels lost amongst the population crowd. Fran Horner from Singola Consulting and Susan Marks from Amati Health explore the ways in which population health and the health contact center work collaboratively to keep patient populations well cared for, healthy, and ultimately improve the patient experience for every individual.

Keywords

Population health, health contact center, patient experience

With the Supreme Court decision upholding the Affordable Care Act in June 2015 and the news about Medicare reimbursements being increasingly tied to quality, the need for healthcare to transform from fee-for-service to pay-for-value is not soon but now. One emerging option to help with this transition and provide valuable care at a more affordable price is population health. However, the integration of a population health strategy is still so relatively new that most in healthcare do not sufficiently understand it, how to incorporate it, or the ways it can and should include a directive to improve the patient experience.

At its core, effective population health strategy should mean looking at the entire patient population in order to improve care results for each and every individual patient. In other words, it is the process of using the data from many in order to create a consistent personalized patient experience. All patient experience improvements within population health fall into three categories: supporting a continuous relationship with the clinical team to deepen loyalty to the organization, helping patients understand their clinical situation, and encouraging them to actively participate in their own care plan. Taking the initiative to engage with all patients early and often, which is part of a successful population health strategy, creates a real working relationship between each individual patient and the clinical team, marrying the larger goal of caring for the entire population while keeping focus on the individual. Additionally, those engaged patients who have had positive and frequent interactions with a healthcare system

are more likely to be engaged in their own health, thereby sharing responsibility with the clinicians and care team.

Creating a memorable patient experience and encouraging patients to be involved in their own care should be a priority of any population health implementation. The newness of this idea in healthcare can create issues, however. If organizations focus solely on the strategy's cost-saving benefits, they can lose sight of population health's ability to concurrently improve the patient experience. In order to demonstrate population health's critical connection to the patient experience, this article will explore a successful population health strategy and examine a tool that supports its efforts, the health contact center, which helps ensure that the individual patient never feels lost amongst the population crowd.

Many health organizations already use contact centers to effectively guide patients and improve access to care. Depending on a health contact center to help implement a population health strategy is smart business, as the contact center of today is so much more than a traditional call center. It provides patients with one number to call in order to receive services across the enterprise. Gone are the days of a patient having to repeat information over and over to schedule services across departments. A fully functioning health contact center gives patients the freedom to choose how and when they interact with their health system, which then improves their experience and levels of engagement. A health contact center has the ability to handle patient emails, web chat, SMS (text),

inbound voice calls, self-service interactive voice response (IVR), outbound outreach, and social media, while ensuring that the information entered into one channel is transferred to another channel in real time. If a patient calls a center, an agent will be able to see if that same patient has ever sent an email inquiry, or if the patient receives or sends SMS messages and the topic of those texts, for example. Patients expect integration of all communication channels and they want to find answers to their questions at a time most convenient for them. Health contact centers give health systems the opportunity to provide this to patients. Thanks to other industries that have led the engagement charge, patients now want and expect to choose when and how they communicate. In order to improve the patient experience, the healthcare industry has to meet that need. If a population health strategy wants to engage every patient, the health contact center supports every aspect of the plan in order to do so.

Population health is a proactive approach that looks at an organization's entire population of patients, not those that initiate a visit and whom have traditionally been the focus of healthcare. Population health broadens the organization's view to include patients who may not be receiving care but for whom the healthcare organization is financially at risk. To improve the health of the population effectively and efficiently, a healthcare organization must take five key steps:

1. Identify the population of interest. This includes deciding who falls within the organization's responsibility and of those, which patients are financial risks.
2. Stratify that population into risk groups. These groups include one for the clinical conditions of today, clinical conditions that increase risk in the near or long-term future ("rising risk"), and those who are currently or at risk for being the highest cost.
3. Engage patients, their caregivers, the community, and clinicians. An organization takes into consideration patient preference in order to build engagement strategies that reach each patient of interest.
4. Intervene with patients that need to lower their risk. An organization does this by applying best practice clinical care algorithms and strategies.
5. Measure the results. Identify key metrics that will track the improvement of the clinical and financial outcomes of the population and monitor the performance of the population health programs.

For every one of these steps, a health contact center can bridge and serve the population health strategy and improve the patient experience. Furthermore, as the continuum of care expands in order to effectively complement population health management, tools or modalities such as the health contact center are needed to efficiently receive patients "reaching in" to the healthcare

system as well as enhance the healthcare system's ability to "reach out" to patients.

Once a patient population has been identified, an effective health contact center can stratify the patient data gleaned from all of the organization's resources—patient portal, EMR, and CMR—into manageable and recognizable segments. Using the contact center's automated telephone dialing system, the data is filtered to identify and prioritize outreach to the different groups of patients, such as men at greater risks for heart disease, those elderly members of the population that will likely need greater care as they age, women who need to schedule a mammogram, and so on. The use of contact center technology improves efficiency by dramatically increasing the number of patients contacted, since the dialing system attempts to reach the patient multiple times but only connects staff to calls that are actually answered by patients.

For many healthcare organizations, reaching out to patients that are not coming in or following their prescribed clinical care plan is "net-new" work. A health contact center can provide the structure to ensure that highly efficient processes and tools are applied to engage all patients. Even better, patients now experience the health system as one holistic entity, giving the appearance of being all knowing and all caring.

A successful engagement strategy starts by first matching patient contact preferences to the health contact center's outbound modalities. Health systems then engage patients in their preferred method and can now provide better and more efficient service for patients by allowing for asynchronous and off-hours access, helping to move patient care forward and provide more care with each interaction. This step of the population health strategy, engagement, is the building block for promoting a great patient experience. Engaging patients in their preferred ways at their preferred times helps to earn patients' loyalty, demonstrates that they have agency in their own care, and shows they are part of the shared responsibility of staying healthy. The identification and stratification stages analyze big data; the engagement step refocuses the process back to the individual level.

By taking into consideration patient preference, an organization can build engagement strategies that reach each patient of interest. Once the patients have been identified and stratified, a health contact center plays a role by proactively reaching out to schedule health screenings to those who need them, as well as seeing profiles of care gaps for every patient that reaches into the center. While the patient is interacting with the system, the technology can prompt an agent to inquire about that patient's population health-related needs, such as giving a reminder to or actually scheduling a mammogram or scheduling a diabetes follow-up visit. It could even connect the patient

with an RN to do a post-discharge transition assessment and ensure they have a follow-up visit with their primary care physician in order to decrease the chances of readmission. Prioritization efforts within the contact center work to make sure that the patients with the highest risk are reached first, such as those patients already diagnosed versus those in need of preventative care measures.

These examples of providing ways to mitigate health risks also count towards the next step of a successful population health management strategy: intervention. Regularly intervening with patients on their risk factors improves their clinical outcomes and decreases the cost for an organization, admirable goals for any healthcare system. Intervention can be reactive, such as when contact center agents inform patients who are “reaching in” about gaps in their care discovered from clinical protocol-driven algorithms. Agents can then actually close those gaps by scheduling tests or appointments. This intervention improves the patient experience by allowing patients to schedule multiple services during one contact and demonstrates the health system’s desire to see patients’ health improve.

But health contact centers can go one step further. They can provide the framework to be proactive when intervening with at-risk patients. A center can work from lists of registries of patients with care gaps, or lists of recently discharged patients who need contact within two business days to reduce readmission risk and qualify for Medicare TCM reimbursement. It then uses the preferred method of contact to reach out to these patients and make sure they receive the proper care at the right time.

Proactive intervention optimizes clinician time by using other resources to remind patients of appointments and provide assistance in accomplishing clinical recommendations. Furthermore, less clinician time is needed for scheduling extra follow-up visits since the care is being done right the first time. This also leads to increased trust and loyalty from the patients. Under this new method of care, patients and their health system work as a team to get and stay healthy.

Finally, it’s important to measure the results to see what works and what needs improvement. Tracking process effectiveness, cost, and clinical improvements help an organization to continually improve and make the patient experience as great as possible. Here again, the health contact center is poised to provide efficient measurement processes. For example, it can provide reports that measure patient contact attempts versus patients reached, the number of care gaps successfully closed, or demonstrate how patients experience an increase in points of connection. Using these measurements, a health system

can start the process anew by identifying the next at risk population in need of care.

Other strategies can also help an organization to be successful. These strategies include narrowing the initial attempt to only the segment of the population for which the health systems are already at financial risk or for whom they have significant quality opportunities via programs such as Medicare. It is equally important to set specific goals and process metrics in order to evaluate the effectiveness and efficiency of this new, proactive approach. For example, goals could be the total number of visits to primary care physicians or improved hypertension control in the patient population. Process metrics might be the percentage of patients reached or the percentage of patients engaged as measured by number of contacts per staff member. After analyzing these metrics, organizations should be willing to evaluate and make refinements in order to improve patient care.

For many organizations, utilizing the health contact center to support the population health strategy is a completely new approach. Ordinarily, a health system is comprised of disparate functions with their own priorities, and the part of the organization that manages the health contact center is not usually the part of the organization that implements population health. This article outlines the opportunity to combine priorities and functions to create a synergy throughout the entire organization. Though this hard-work approach requires further investments of staff time and technology, many health systems already have the foundations in place and simply need to reevaluate existing initiatives. In other words, bringing together these diverse parts of the same system will allow all departments to harvest the organization’s existing assets. We are unaware of an organization that fully combines its population health strategy and health contact center, and thus the industry is ripe for this opportunity, for this needed synergy, and for the ability to increase its existing return on investment.

In conclusion, setting a single, complete touch strategy like the one outlined in this article saves patients time and energy and supports improving the health of the population. Scheduling a mammogram while on the phone to schedule a flu shot keeps patients healthy and prevents them from forgetting to keep up with their own health. Contact center agents that are already employed by the organization can be proactive in managing the lists generated during the identification and stratification stages. They can make regularly scheduled calls to patients with disease processes that require constant monitoring and ensure that they are, in fact, being constantly monitored. An effective health contact center, working properly in conjunction with a population health strategy, has the ability to reach all patients, whether it is generating daily calls or SMS texts to check in with patients, reminding

them to take their medicine, or even asking diabetes patients to provide blood sugar levels. This type of interaction and commitment from an organization to its patients will concretely show that patient experience and health matter. No longer is the onus of the first contact placed onto the patient; instead, patients will be truly cared for and looked after. That is the patient experience dream, and it comes as a result of an excellent population health strategy.