

# Patient Engagement in the Midst of a Pandemic

The Patient of Yesterday Is Not the Patient of Today

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Research across the United States is confirming what individuals in the healthcare sector witness each day: COVID-19 is having a significant impact on healthcare utilization.<sup>12</sup> Congress has scrambled to enact legislation and continues to reevaluate how to assist the sector during these unprecedented times. Luckily, the groundwork for telehealth was laid prior to the pandemic; however, not all providers offered telehealth or had operations to leverage such technology. In Texas, I've encountered many clinicians who were struggling with the transition to CEHRT, still using fax machines for secure transfer of patient data, and debating on hiring a scribe to input their notes. I've seen multiple articles explaining and theorizing the financial and technological impact COVID-19 will have on our system. But aren't we forgetting the most important part of the equation? The patient.

We hear about reimbursement rates, advocates fighting for changes in value-based contracts, waivers for telemedicine, stimulus checks, PPP loans, etc. What I've heard so little of is what the healthcare sector is doing right now to help, and understand, all of our patients. The patient of yesterday is not the patient of today. The lives of our neighbors, friends, parents, companions, and children have changed. From fear to apathy from loneliness to anger, patients are experiencing a complex world without clarity or communication. Now more than ever, patients need their healthcare teams.

I understand that our healthcare teams are inundated with the challenges, economic hardships, and operational burdens due to COVID-19. Yet, we need to reassure our patients that they still have access to care and that we need to hear from them:

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<sup>1</sup> "COVID Poll." n.d. National Association of ACOs. Accessed June 17, 2020. <https://www.naacos.com/covid-poll>.

<sup>2</sup> 2020. Healthcare Professionals and the Impact of COVID-19. FAIR Health Inc. <https://s3.amazonaws.com/media2.fairhealth.org/brief/asset/Healthcare%20Professionals%20and%20the%20Impact%20of%20COVID-19%20-%20A%20Comparative%20Study%20of%20Revenue%20and%20Utilization%20-%20A%20FAIR%20Health%20Brief.pdf>

- **Contact ALL of your patients now – do not wait for them to contact your office.** This can be as simple as a mass e-blast or text to your patient panel or as personalized as a phone call from office staff. Let your patients know what you and your team are doing, what your clinical recommendations are in the face of COVID-19, where they can go when they need care, and reassure them you're here for them in sickness and in health. If you have the knowledge, provide a list of local resources such as COVID-19 testing sites, grocery delivery, meal and transportation assistance, etc.
- **Call your high-risk patients.** Patients with chronic conditions are not only at high-risk for COVID-19 complications, but may be more likely to avoid care due to concern of contracting the virus. These individuals and their caregivers could really benefit from a telehealth check-in with a clinician to help the healthcare team understand their unique circumstances, ward off any unnecessary hospitalizations, and keep the lines of communication open.
- **Encourage meaningful feedback from your patients.** This goes beyond asking questions that feed quality metrics (e.g. CAHPS Survey); this is about truly understanding what patients need during this time of crisis. Communication with patients should encourage reciprocity and shared decision-making. It's easy to build communication that talks at the patient (especially when sending messages through email/text/portal) without ever asking for a response. Listening to what patients have to say right now is critical to building clinician-patient relationships and personalizing communication, initiatives, and care. Whether you create an online questionnaire, embed a few questions in a portal message, or develop a script for outbound calls - ask your patients what they need, what barriers they have to receiving care, if they have any fears or concerns, and what your staff can do for them. Then take action based on their feedback.
- **Test your technology.** This may seem like a no-brainer, but it needs to be said. Prior to conducting a telehealth visit, test your technology and verify that the patient understands how to use the app/system for the visit. The last thing the clinician or patient needs is a failed telehealth visit that causes more stress and anxiety than relief.
- **Communicate often.** No, your patients may not want or need a daily update on activities within your practice. However, during this type of crisis and until guidance quits changing so quickly, a monthly general outreach may help add stability and comfort to your patient's mindset. You should include

any changes in your practice operations, clinical recommendations, and community resources.

Telehealth has been an excellent way to engage and communicate with certain patients during this time. We expect that telehealth will continue its hold in healthcare as we move forward. However, telehealth visits for select patients won't be enough to maintain and improve the wellbeing of all patients. Each individual deserves to hear from their healthcare team and, frankly, our industry needs to hear from the patients. Patient engagement doesn't have to mean building robust incentive programs and outreach. It can be as simple as picking up the phone. A warm conversation can be far more impactful than a free promotional item or flashy media campaign, especially when the world is so uncertain. The patient should remain at the center of the fight against COVID-19, but also needs to have a seat at the table to help us further understand their overall healthcare needs during and after the pandemic.

And lastly, thank you to all the healthcare teams who are working so diligently during this time. You are all heroes and beacons of light to the rest of us wandering around aimlessly with our masks and Clorox wipes. Your dedication and commitment to the wellbeing of our citizens is remarkable. Thank you.