Use EHR as an Effective Patient Education Tool

By Duane Wires, OD

SYNOPSIS

A key goal of health care reform is to improve patient outcomes, and getting patients engaged in their treatment plans is a critical component in that process. Your EHR system can help you achieve that--if you learn to optimize it.

ACTION POINT

ENCOURAGE USE OF PATIENT PORTAL. Show patients how to access their records to view their diagnoses and treatment plans.

FACILITATE DOCTOR-PATIENT DISCUSSION. Encourage patients to look at their records at home before their next visit. Well informed patients can ask better questions of you.

USE SECURE E-MAIL TO RECALL. Remind patients of upcoming appoints and needed treatments via the secure e-mail and texting systems of an EHR solution.

Whether your patient has a medical eyecare condition like glaucoma or macular degeneration, or a vision issue like astigmatism, there's a good chance they don't understand it. As a doctor it's your job to ensure they understand why attending to their condition or issue is important. Your EHR solution can help you do this. Here is how my practice uses our EHR solution, Eyefinity EHR , to help patients understand their eye health and vision challenges.

Patient Portal Provides 24/7 Patient Access to Records
Your patients used to have to come to your office and request a copy of their records. Now, thanks to systems like Eyefinity EHR, they have access to those records at home or anywhere they choose to look through them. With the new Eyefinity EHR solution, patient education becomes a seamless addition to the doctor's communication in the exam room. Patients can access their patient portal and bring up education that is specific to their diagnosis. Eyefinity EHR provides a library of educational material that is now modifiable by the doctor, making customized use of it for patient education easier than ever.

Many times patients do not really understand or remember their diagnosis. Now your patients can look up their diagnoses at home anytime either to read the provided education or to research it further. For example, let's say the patient has been diagnosed with glaucoma, and they can't remember the name of this disease. Despite my best efforts, they were too overwhelmed to remember or to otherwise note the diagnosis and treatment plan. Once home, after the news has sunk in, they can go online to their patient portal and look up everything that took place during their office visit, including a description of the diagnosis and my recommended treatment plan.

Besides allowing the patient to take that information and do their own research online or elsewhere, the information helps reinforce their discussion with me. They will be able to review the information and formulate questions to call or e-mail me with or ask during their next appointment.

Doctors are Forced to Put Patient Records in Proper Format
In the days of paper-based records, doctors often left parts of the patient record documents blank-—they simply ran out of time to do full documentation, forgot or just didn't care. With an EHR solution, full documentation of every patient visit is required. If the doctor doesn't properly fill out patient record forms, the system alerts the doctor that the patient record is incomplete and needs to be fully completed before it can be stored to the EHR's files.

Proper documentation for every patient, combined with the ability for the patient to access this documentation anytime they want, is the first step to ensuring you have an educated patient base. Educated patients are more likely to understand your treatment plan, and, therefore, follow-through with all their needed office visits and medication plans.

Doctors Can Offer Faster Answers to Patient Questions
As much as some of us like to believe we have all the answers, the reality is none of us do—we all can use a little help sometimes. So, when a patient who has been newly diagnosed has a question about their condition or about a medication we have just prescribed, it's possible we may not know the answer. Fortunately, systems like Eyefinity EHR have built-in help for these kinds of situations. Eyefinity EHR's Clinical Grand Rounds Tab has been an excellent addition to medical care in my practice. The tab instantly lets you know what the top treatments are for any medical ocular disease.

Directly Import Into Records--and Show Patients--Instrumentation Photos
Through equipment integration, we are able to directly import the patient's refraction, visual fields, OCT Scans and Optos Retinal photos into Eyefinity EHR. We can compare not only multiple visits, but also multiple instruments in the exam room while working with the Eyefinity EHR.

Enhance Patient Communication with an integrated EHR/Practice Management Solution
Sending the right message to the right patient at the right time can help increase your patient engagement and loyalty with your office. Using an EHR solution that integrates with your practice management software is vital to do this easily and effectively. Here are two ways that our office uses EHR data to help us communicate with patients:

• Patient Educational Information – Patient Education is automatically available 24/7 with the Patient's Portal. The education they receive is specific to their diagnosis. Patient communication can be facilitated using a vendor that integrates into our practice management solution to send an e-mail to all our astigmatic patients about a new toric contact lens available to them and more. EHR and practice management solutions used jointly can pull together a list of patients to send educational information. Or we can e-mail all of our patients with dry eye and tell them about a new eye drop that may help them out. We are careful to mention that patients visit our office for more information.
Editor's Note: It is a HIPAA violation for a vendor to send a mailing to a doctor's patients directly, but a doctor can mail patients on behalf of a vendor.

• Promote Use of the Patient Portal – We e-mail our patients with the instructions on how to access their patient portal. Then patients can update their medical history before their next appointment or review their previous visit and prepare any questions for their next visit. They can also access their health information and give it to another provider. This can be very valuable for patients who have diabetes or other health conditions.

• Patient Reminders – We also use a patient communication vendor that integrates with our EHR and practice management solutions to send e-mail reminders to schedule an appointment, confirm an appointment or let them know that their eyewear is ready for pick-up.