

## Make the Most of Patient Education Opportunities at Your Practice

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Do you think your patients would rather be educated by their provider or by Dr. WebMD? Make your practice the place patients can go to learn about their healthcare from the person they trust most — you.

When you hear the term "patient education," do you think only of the interaction that takes place in the exam room between a provider and their patient, and usually around helping a patient manage illness? It can be so much more than that. There are opportunities to engage patients in a variety of settings, and to expand the scope from disease management to comprehensive care.

First, let me define what I mean by "education." Patients have all sorts of educational needs from requiring simple information about your practice policies to looking for a more sophisticated understanding and management of chronic diseases. So view education as the process by which you provide information and knowledge to your patients.

### At your practice

Every employee who comes in contact with your patients has an opportunity to educate. Your front desk should be able to inform and explain to patients the policies and procedures of the practice. Your clinical support staff should be able to provide handouts that explain your most frequent procedures and basic chronic conditions.

Look around your practice. Do you see ongoing education happening around you or do you need to have the same conversations with patients over and over again? Cut down the time you spend on the phone and in the exam room by training staff to view every interaction as an opportunity to support patient education. You'll need to provide them the tools to do it, however, so create brochures, "one-sheets," and other handouts to help spread the word.

### On your website

Many medical practice websites are simply informational and not inspirational. That is, they typically consist of pages that talk about the providers and list the address, phone number, and office hours. But that's an opportunity lost. If a patient arrives at your website, what is it that you'd really like them to learn? If you are in sports medicine, that might be injury prevention. Or if you are in primary care, appropriate nutrition might be what you'd love to talk to your patients about, but seldom have the time to do so during clinic hours. Create an online experience that seeks to educate your site visitors instead.

Now, I hear you say, "I'd love to do that, but there just isn't time to write up all the information!" Well, here's the good news — you don't have to. It is likely that you are constantly reading and coming across material that you feel is important to patients. If so, post a link to it and a quick paragraph about why you think it would benefit patients. That's enough of an endorsement for many of your patients to trust the recommendation and take the advice to heart.

Don't believe me? Think about this — do you think your patients would rather be educated by their provider or by Dr. WebMD? So view your website as a place that your patients can go to learn about important aspects of their care from the person they trust most — *you*.

Not only will you cut down on calls to the office, you may also shorten the time you spend in the exam room because you can refer patients to your website to access the information you want them

to learn about. And having a customized online resource with information available to your patients not only marks you as an expert in your field, it also facilitates a trusting relationship with your patients — one that creates loyalty.

### **Through social media**

You've come this far, so why not go one step further? Social media applications like Facebook pages and Twitter present great opportunities to stay in touch with your patients between office visits. It also allows you to build a relationship with your patients — something that is hard to do in a 10-minute visit once a year.

The best use of Facebook is to showcase not just good health information, but to also show the personality of your practice. Facebook is social, and patients want you to be too. I don't mean to suggest that you should be posting private details and opening up your personal life to patients, but you should certainly consider profiling your providers and staff from time-to-time, as well as posting healthy lifestyle tidbits, general clinical information, and relevant articles.

Twitter is a great way to push out interesting bits of information and newsworthy pieces. It also allows you to broadcast practice news; such as announcing that you have flu shots available, or that your practice will now be offering a new service, or has added a new provider.

So, view Facebook and Twitter as ways to expand your practice beyond your physical walls. I've heard more than one physician tell me "That would take up too much time." Not so! Check out Hootsuite.com which is an application that allows you to add messages and schedule when they will post to your social media sites. I run a number of Facebook and Twitter accounts for our clients, yet spend only a couple of hours a week doing so, thanks to this application.

### **Tying it all together**

If you do it right, you'll end up with plenty of material in your office and quite a large online library on your website. You'll have interactions on Facebook and maybe some conversations and bulletins on Twitter. Bring it all together and you'll be amazed at how efficient disseminating important information and referring to great resources becomes.

Here are a few tips to get you started:

- Promote your website and social media accounts on *all* your practice marketing material.
- Hand out business cards that invite patients to browse your website and become a "fan" of your practice's Facebook page and follow you on Twitter — if you just do one social-media site, choose Facebook.
- Have the same information that you hand out in the office available on your website, so that patients have the option to take home a paper copy or view it on your website instead.
- Have your staff inform patients about what is available online. Think along the lines of helping a patient keep track of their diet by referring them to your website to download a food log that you've posted there.
- Add Facebook and Twitter "plug-ins" to your website. (It's easy, really.) The information you post there will then show on your website too. This is a great way to keep content fresh and up to date, and keep patients coming back for more.

Remember, the more you educate your patients, the better able they will be to participate in their own healthcare. And that's a goal that everyone should learn about!

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