Equipping Physicians for Purposeful Patient Interactions in Various Settings

As more healthcare leaders are understanding the full significance of the patient–physician relationship and its impact on patient comprehension, care outcomes, and satisfaction levels, organizations are focusing on enhancing communication and the patient experience across care sites to ultimately improve healthcare delivery. With this in mind, it is valuable for organizations to work with physicians and provide them with resources to create communicative, positive patient experiences in their everyday practice.

To gain a better understanding of the importance of patient–physician interactions, The Academy spoke with Donna Lawien, the Director of Patient Experience and Organizational Effectiveness at Froedtert & the Medical College of Wisconsin health network, and Aamer Ahmed, the Director of Patient Experience and Provider Onboarding for the Medical College of Wisconsin physicians. Froedtert Health and the Medical College of Wisconsin partner to form the Froedtert & MCW health network.

Setting the Foundation for Communication and Relationships

In order to guide communication, it is crucial for organizations to set a broad framework for interactions with patients. Initially, the Studer Group, an external operational excellence consulting firm, introduced AIDET® (Acknowledge, Introduce, Duration, Explanation, Thank You) to Froedtert Hospital as an evidence-based communication tactic for patient–staff interactions.

For AIDET® to appeal to physicians, who typically favor research-oriented results to guide their actions and medical decisions, Froedtert & MCW leaders went beyond the mnemonic to emphasize why it is important for physicians to set a positive tone with patients, connect, and practice empathy. By affirming the benefits of purposeful communication, such as decreased patient anxiety and improved outcomes, leaders help physicians recognize the need to strive for exceptional experiences.

Today, Froedtert & MCW health network still incorporates the five components of AIDET® as a general framework for communication. Physicians and staff are encouraged to customize AIDET® for their departments, medical practices, and the individual patients with whom they are working. Standardized language and key phrases used within the Froedtert & MCW health network ensure that patients have a consistent, high-quality experience across sites.

Some recommended key phrases include, “I want to make sure I have explained this thoroughly for your safety,” “I’m closing this drape for your privacy,” and “We have a wonderful team here, and we are...
going to take great care of you!”

“You need to have a foundation for people to work from, but it’s also important, particularly with our physicians, to be able to make it theirs,” Lawien says of this communication. “In order for it to be heartfelt and purposeful, it has to be personal.”

This form of “personalized standardization” is encouraged to help providers develop genuine connections with their patients. To balance uniformity and customization, leaders collaborate and prioritize patient needs at a high level through strategic planning, but empower entities to meet goals uniquely at the local level.

**Enhancing Interactions**

While it is valuable to establish baseline expectations for patient-physician interactions, employing additional strategies or interventions across different settings can help augment patient experiences as well.

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**Excerpt of Froedtert & MCW Patient Agenda Form**

Welcome to the SpineCare Program. Today, you will be meeting with Dr. Shekar Kurpad. In order to maximize your time with him, please answer the question below so we can be sure your questions or concerns are addressed, and so that Dr. Kurpad can best assess your needs.

Name: ____________________________ Date: ________________

What symptoms, questions and concerns would you like to discuss at today’s appointment?

*The Patient Agenda Form features a picture and biography of the physician at one side, and also identifies patients’ top priorities, allowing for more targeted discussions with physicians.*

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On the inpatient side, Froedtert & MCW physicians use evidence-based best practices such as physician rounding to address any patient needs or concerns. Providers also participate in whole-team care coordination rounds, which include patients and their families in discussing the care plan. Further, hospitalists use physician face cards to help keep patients informed. The physician face cards, which resemble business cards, contain the name and image of the provider in charge of a patient’s care—which can be especially helpful in an environment where patients encounter many caregivers.

Recently implemented strategies in some of the ambulatory practices include team poster displays, patient agendas, and mailers sent to patients’ homes. The mailers cover the care team and individual(s) the patient is going to see, what to expect during the visit, and who to contact with questions. Setting the stage before patients arrive optimizes the time with physicians, allowing them to go over questions that have not yet been addressed.

Team posters, displayed on exam room doors, include photos and descriptions of all the physicians, residents, mid-level providers, nurses, and staff. This resource allows the individual rooming a patient to “manage up” care team members by referring to the poster as a talking point.
At some Froedtert & MCW clinics, patients also receive a patient agenda form at registration, which allows them to write down major questions or concerns regarding their visit. Before entering the exam room, physicians read over the patient’s notes. By taking the time to address patients’ main concerns, physicians have been able to make the most out of short appointments and focus on building rapport.

**Monitoring Metrics and Feedback**

Froedtert & MCW’s program uses a mixture of quantitative and qualitative methods to measure success. In addition to CAHPS surveys and public satisfaction reporting, the organization relies on piloting and observing specific interventions.

“Even if it is a best practice that is known, we pilot those practices here to see if it is effective in our environment,” Ahmed says. For instance, in a pilot study with local physicians, Froedtert & MCW found patient agenda forms tremendously useful in improving patient satisfaction scores.

Furthermore, the organization is investing in ways to make patient stories, comments, and feedback available to frontline staff, as well as spending time with leaders and physicians to provide them with comments. Patient interviews are sometimes conducted around Froedtert & MCW’s specific interventions. For example, to see if the physician face cards were effective, patients were interviewed to find out if they could recall their physician’s name and role before and after receiving cards. By doing so, the Froedtert & MCW health network has been able to put the patient perspective first.

By providing physicians and patients with resources and tools to enhance interactions, organizations can help providers optimize critical face time with their patients to foster relationships and improve patients’ understanding of their care, which is necessary for exceptional experiences.