Guest Column | August 27, 2015

Patient Portals: Turning Health Information Into Actionable Insights
By Christina Slade, VP of product management for cross-platform solutions, Greenway Health

Patient portals have come a long way since their original administrative functions of scheduling appointments, managing prescription refills, and completing forms prior to seeing a doctor. Today, the patient portal is evolving into a more interactive tool that bridges the gap between the patient and the provider. Increased provider access enables patients to take a more active role in maintaining their health of populations and helps physicians to achieve healthcare's Triple Aim: improving the patient experience, improving health populations, and reducing per-capita costs of healthcare delivery.

Improving The Patient Experience
We live in a self-service economy where we expect certain services to be available 24/7, from wherever we are. Similar to how we as consumers have become accustomed to the convenience of online banking, today's emerging healthcare consumers expect technology to give them easy access to their health information and providers. Intuitive portals with increasingly rich functionality and accessibility enable patients to do just this, manage and securely share their health information with ease from virtually any device.

Improving Population Health
Pay-for-performance is the fastest-growing reimbursement model in the healthcare industry. This value-based model improves the health of patient populations by measuring performance improvements in key processes that lead to better health outcomes. As an example, for a diabetic patient population, a physician will want to ensure that they are identifying patients with poor glycemic control so they can focus on helping those patients better manage their diabetes, thereby lowering risk for eye, kidney, and nerve disease in the future. In order to be successful as adoption of pay-for-performance programs grow, physicians and other clinicians will need patient engagement tools that motivate patients to take a more active role in managing their health.

Portals can also play a vital role in enabling patients to manage their health outside of an office visit and keep them out of the hospital. With better access to health information and educational materials, patients are more empowered with an understanding of what actions they can take to improve their health. By having a place to track biometric data taken in the comfort of their home, the patient and the provider have better visibility to underlying trends and take a more proactive approach to care.

Reducing Costs
Patient portals help practices manage costs and increase return on investment (ROI) by reducing phone calls and automating workflows such as patient appointment reminders and bill pay. Intelligent portals route patient queries to the appropriate resource, such as a scheduler, nurse, or care manager. For example, if a patient isn't sure about the doctor's care recommendations following an appointment, the patient can send a secure message to the practice and — rather than waiting for the doctor to have time to respond — the appropriate delegate can promptly handle the inquiry.

Additionally, patient portals not only improve patient access, but also practice efficiency. They reduce the frequency of phone calls between the practice and the patient by providing constant online access to health services, including administrative tasks like refilling prescriptions, scheduling appointments and paying bills. If a diabetes patient notices a change in his condition, he can send a secure message to the doctor to determine if this change warrants a visit. Patients can also review their doctor's orders, instructions on daily medications, and other health recommendations from the comfort of their homes.

Today, portals are fulfilling the promise of information technology to engage consumers, improve patient-provider interaction, as well as keep individuals and whole populations healthier and more satisfied with their healthcare experience. By increasing access to patient health information and encouraging an ongoing dialogue with physicians, patient portals are key to turning health information into behavioral change and improved outcomes.

About The Author
Christina Slade is a vice president of product management for cross-platform solutions at Greenway Health. For more information, visit www.greenwayhealth.com.