Harmonize
your enterprise

A new way to engage in healthcare

Improving experience, driving efficiencies,
delivering positive outcomes

Introduction

A text message sent to all off-duty personnel in the event of a major incident. Specialists instantly notified should their patients visit the emergency department. Appointment reminders allowing patients to confirm, cancel, or rebook their consultations.

Automation doesn't have to mean a drop in quality or patient satisfaction. In fact, as with these examples, it's often quite the reverse.

For a sector well used to marrying the often-competing priorities of patient care and budgetary prudence, the ability of technology to reach out to patients and care teams is making a dramatic difference.

In the United Kingdom, for example, Birmingham Children's Hospital has deployed a referral system that allows critically ill children to be instantly assessed and triaged by a consultant pediatric intensivist in conjunction with other onsite and offsite specialists.

In the United States, a similar story of efficiency and patient care. Here more than 2,000 clinicians at Chester County Hospital enjoy instant access to hospital information systems at the patient bedside or any point-of-care throughout the building.

In Belgium's University Hospital Liège, over a million calls are efficiently handled every year – with automated call-backs, web chat, and text messaging to reduce wait times and improve patient experiences.

But so much more is possible. Patients, care professionals and entire organizations stand to benefit significantly from new ways to engage with one another – both inside the hospital and beyond its walls.

Here, we take a look at the possible and the proven – opportunities that don't just speed up decision-making, reduce cost, or eliminate administrative burdens, but that have a truly marked impact on patient care.

An engaging opportunity

In the UK, the National Health Service deals with over a million patients every thirty-six hours. In the US over thirty-five million patients are discharged in any given year. Similar figures are available for health systems around the world.

The point is that, as populations grow and age, and as patients present with multiple and more complex conditions, responding to these volume challenges puts increasing pressure on already stretched resources.

Care teams and managers are being asked to reduce the length and number of inpatient stays. Community doctors have to respond to dramatic increases in consultations, while hospitals and other providers are increasing the numbers of home, community and lone workers to assure continuity of care.

The ability to respond to an increasingly challenging healthcare environment requires new approaches to managing patient care.

Add into the mix the question of provider choice, and the environment becomes more challenging still. In many countries, patients can select the organization that will undertake their care provision. Choice may be limited due to a host of factors, but some element is usually in evidence. Certainly, in major urban centers, it's readily available.

Therefore it is vital that, alongside delivering exceptional patient care, hospitals and healthcare providers invest in customer service – and not just to build brand or more effectively support the patient journey. Many government-funded institutions are now partially measured on patient satisfaction. Customer service is therefore a regulatory imperative.

The question is how to achieve it all. And it's much less complicated than many assume.

Engaging thinking

Let's first consider the patient experience - by contrasting engagement in health with customer service from the very best carriers in the airline industry. First, these airlines know their customers incredibly well – because they talk to them. Not just during booking or the flight, but all the time, offering promotions, providing automated reminders, and gaining feedback.

They keep detailed records on where their customers fly, how often, where they sit and, increasingly, what they eat and drink. And customers are offered convenient ways to check in and a range of powerful mobile apps that eliminate queuing, provide detailed journey information, and offer instant customer service contacts.

While it's certainly true that such approaches aren't universally found across the industry – with many budget airlines being synonymous with poor service – those at the top end of the market build their businesses on excellence.

In contrast, many hospital visits begin at a reception desk where little is known about the patient – even whether they have the right day or if they should be there at all. After completing pages of forms and releases, or with a long list of directions, patients are sent off to the right department. Following the appointment, few organizations choose to offer text reminders of when to take and refill prescribed medicines. And, should repeat appointments be necessary, letters tend to arrive late; a few days before the prescribed appointment, if at all.

This dystopia isn't the case for all hospitals and healthcare providers. However, the scenario is far from uncommon and serves as a counterpoint to the kind of engagement being offered to customers in other markets – great experiences that could easily be adopted in healthcare.

Great engagement experiences

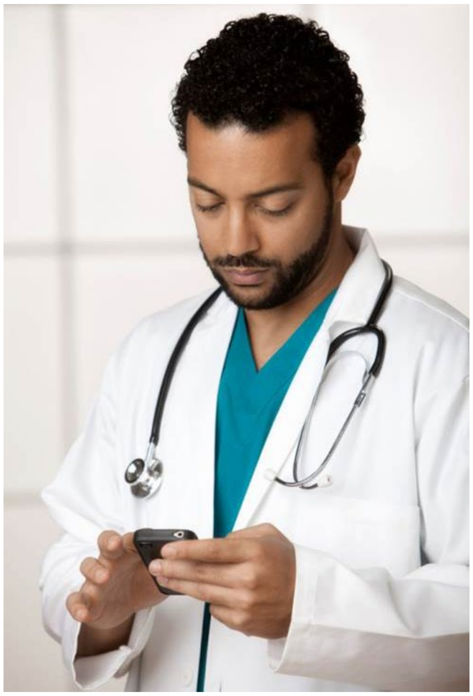
Of course, the healthcare case for automated SMS appointment alerts and reminders to save time and money are well documented. Reaching out in a timely fashion by text can reduce appoint non-attendance rates by some 50%.

But it is possible, even preferable, to go further. Patients could be offered 'call back' opportunities in these messages. Better still, a 'reply by text' option could allow them to swiftly cancel or rebook appointments for another time. Not only would this further drive missed appointment rates down, it would empower the patient, giving some sense of personal control – which may be lacking or lost during treatment.

This process of reaching out to, and managing interactions with, patients can be applied to other healthcare processes. Along with medication alerts and reminders, allowing contact center advisors to give out appointment details – without patients having to endure multiple transfers and queues to reach the specific department – would be a welcome change.

Discharging responsibilities

Contact center and automated messaging solutions could also play an efficiency-driving role in discharge. With the patient ready to leave, the same alerting applications could automatically inform stakeholders of a planned discharge and ensure community teams have all required details, and have accepted the patient into their care. Similarly, transport requests could be sent and confirmed by text.



This all adds up to a faster discharge process for 'ordinary' cases while allowing time for more complex discharges situations to be escalated to appropriate team members – both inside the hospital and in the community. Moreover, automated engagement could continue well after discharge, from medication monitoring to notifying specialists should the patient return to an emergency department.

Ultimately, alongside the undoubted efficiency and customer service benefits, the result of this automated outreach is a more positive outcome for the patient.

Medical support

But why restrict these outreach options to patients? The same logic can be applied to streamline time consuming (and often manual) processes that take care professionals away from their patients.

Consider the challenge of covering short-notice sickness and absence. Managing the off-duty is a time-consuming and frustrating process at best. So, when staff call in sick, it is often quicker and easier to call an agency to assure the right levels of cover. Of course, it's also a lot more expensive.

Rather than waste resources calling all off-duty personnel or spending additional budget defaulting to external agencies, care teams could simply 'click to text' all departmental staff willing to work extra shifts. Should this first option yield no response within a given timeframe, the request could be automatically escalated to the 'willing to work' lists of associated departments – for example between pediatric and neonatal wards. This kind of simple solution would vastly reduce administrative overhead and save agency staff costs. In more advanced instances, requests for support can automatically query entire medical staff databases to locate available caregivers from across the hospital.

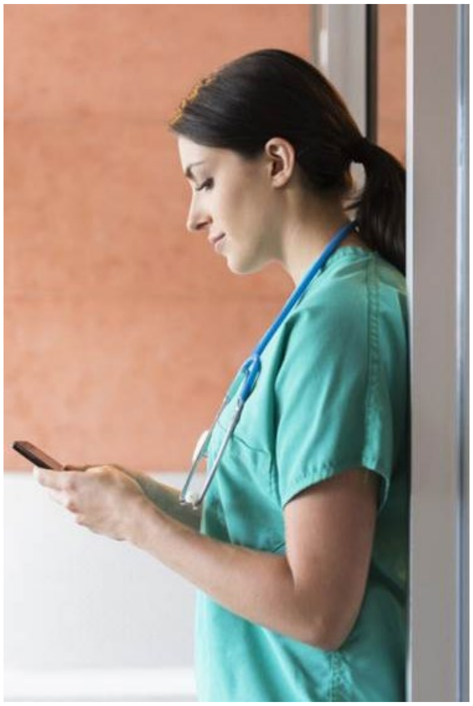
The important point is that while the communications technology exists today to facilitate these kinds of resource finding-and-sharing models, adoption often requires a cultural shift.

Fast incident response

Extending this rapid up-staffing process to cover a major incident is a straightforward task. A specific 'all staff' message would be broadcast to the devices of all appropriate care professionals.

Two-way messaging allows staff to acknowledge the request while giving coordinators an incredibly fast view of the likely capacity of the department. This all happens in seconds, eliminating the need for personnel to waste time on the phone calling for cover. And in an emergency, saving time really can save lives.

Alerting tools could also be used to bring specific surgical teams together – with customized messages going to the smartphones of onsite or offsite specialists. 'Click to call back' links allow consultants to be connected with coordinators and instantly apprised of any situation.



Extending functionality

Extending the functionality of SMS alerts to a more sophisticated level offers colleagues and response coordinators the ability to 'see' the availability of desired specialists using 'presence'.

Clinicians simply set their presence-status as 'unavailable', perhaps adding 'in surgery until 10 pm' or 'in clinic' for example. Should they be offsite, users can specify on which device they can best be reached – or utilise a 'one number' service that will automatically redirect the call to the best device. In more time critical situations, emergency response agents could also 'barge in' if the desired specialist were on another line or showing presence as 'unavailable'.

For those many clinical situations where a face-to-face assessment is preferable, or detailed data (such as scans ad x-rays) is required, web collaboration technologies bring care teams together online – at the point of care, on the move, or in other hospitals – over whatever device they choose.

Conclusion

As we see, whether enhancing the patient experience or managing complex emergency incidents, automating outreach offers intriguing possibilities for care professionals at the sharp end of an increasingly complex and demanding environment.

The answer isn't limited to alerting solutions, of course. But they do offer very winnable opportunities as part of a wider move to more efficient workflows that can, for example, save a 500-bed hospital £170k per annum by improving the use of clinical time, ad £4.3m per annum through reducing patients' length of stay[1].

Similarly, in the UK, by improving quality metrics around experience, the same 500-bed facilities can achieve Commissioning for Quality and Innovation (CQUIN) targets and benefit from payments by as much as £250k per annum.

For our part, Unify is helping over fifteen thousand healthcare organizations around the world realize these financial and patient-care objectives by driving new, easier and more productive ways to work.

Ultimately, the end result is a happier and more productive workforce with time to care – which leads to more positive outcomes and more satisfied patients.

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[1] Source: Deloitte Reports "The Economic Impact of Hospedia" October 2013

About Unify

Unify is one of the world's leading communications software and services brands, providing integrated communications and collaboration solutions worldwide. Our customers range in size from 5 employees to 500,000+ employees. Our solutions unify multiple voice, video and data networks, connected devices and applications into one easy-to-use platform that allows teams to collaborate effectively and efficiently – anytime, anywhere. The result is a transformation of how the enterprise communicates and collaborates that amplifies collective effort, energizes the business, improves employee satisfaction and enhances business performance. Unify has a strong heritage of product reliability, innovation, open standards and security. Our OpenScape and Circuit communications solutions provide a seamless and efficient collaboration experience – on any device. Together, the group's global team of UCC experts and service professionals set the standard for a rich communications and collaboration experience that empowers teams to deliver better results. Unify is an Atos company.

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