The Eye-Q Factor: Raising Your Patients’ Knowledge Through Automated Education

Using automated communication tools, doctors can now direct relevant education to their patients, wherever and whenever, on their preferred electronic device. In the information age, while the good news is that patients have access to a wealth of information, the bad news is that the information can often be random and disorganized.

Now, the latest patient education tools ensure that eyecare professionals can focus the information they provide their patients’ based on their diagnoses and treatment in a more personalized way. In fact, the government is requiring this electronic sharing of information as mandated by Meaningful Use requirements.

The ability to access educational materials at home, either through a practice’s patient portal or via email or text messages, has effectively revolutionized the patient education process, according to the practitioners I spoke to for this article.

“Educated patients understand the importance of their eye health,” said Jay Henry, OD, MS, partner at Hermann and Henry Eyecare in Pickerington, Ohio. “They come in regularly for eye exams, and they want our recommendations for treatments, whether it’s eyeglasses, contact lenses or prescription medications, that are best for them.”

Indeed, Henry believes educating his patients has helped drive sales of premium products in his practice. He also credits it with improving the care patients receive, because it allows them to make more informed decisions about their vision care. But, of course, that is not the only reason why he makes sure his patients are educated.

Since 2012, Meaningful Use has placed renewed focus on patient education among all health care providers, including optometrists and ophthalmologists. Part of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009—also known as the “stimulus package”—Meaningful Use effectively established financial incentives designed to encourage doctors to transition to electronic health record (EHR) systems and/or related add-on software products that not only digitize patient case files but assist in the delivery—and, perhaps most importantly, the documentation of said delivery—of educational communications relevant to these patients, based on the diagnoses and treatments they receive.

According to Henry and other eyecare practitioners who spoke to Vision Monday for this article, companies offering EHR and related technologies have made significant improvements to their offerings in recent years, making them easier to use and providing a simple and effective way to meet Meaningful Use requirements while providing invaluable assistance in educating their patients on a multitude of ocular conditions and treatments.

So how are some eyecare practices educating their patients in the digital age?

**Patient Education and Meaningful Use**

After 2015, Medicare required that all eligible health care professionals—including optometrists and ophthalmologists—meet Meaningful Use EHR requirements, or face financial penalties. With that in mind, it’s important to note that Meaningful Use also requires practitioners to document their efforts to meet these metrics.

Although eyecare practitioners have been training staff on how to educate patients for decades, electronic education has changed the way that this can be accomplished. Practitioners still educate patients while they are sitting at the exam chair or at the dispensing table, and many still rely on brochures and other materials.

However, thanks to improved EHR technology, more and more of these educational efforts are being conducted in front of a computer screen, or using other electronic devices. This new mode of communication has meant that even experienced eyecare practice staff members have had to effectively re-learn how to educate patients. This is no easy task, even though EHR and other software vendors typically provide free—and comprehensive—training programs included in the purchase price.

“Now, if I hire new staff people, I have to be sure I am hiring people who are computer savvy,” noted Mary Anne C. Murphy, OD, of Front Range Eye Associates in Broomfield, Colo. “That’s how we’re communicating with our patients now.”

Available software systems designed to assist eyecare practitioners in the delivery of patient education typically fall into one (or more) of the following categories: comprehensive EHR systems that include patient education components or can be integrated with separate patient education software platforms; patient education platforms that can interface with separate EHR systems; and patient “engagement” (i.e., communications) programs that can interface with separate EHR systems.

Most of the patient education materials offered by software manufacturers are developed either by experienced eyecare practitioners or are sourced by established medical information suppliers, such as the National Library of Medicine’s MedlinePlus database, the world’s largest medical library that provides an online resource for information on diseases, conditions and treatments using non-technical language. Most are customizable according to the needs of individual practices.

Systems should also offer flexibility in the way educational information is disseminated to patients, Henry said. Several companies’ systems enable the creation of individual patient portals for all patients in a practice, which allows patients to access their profile information and any relevant educational resources, online, at any time.