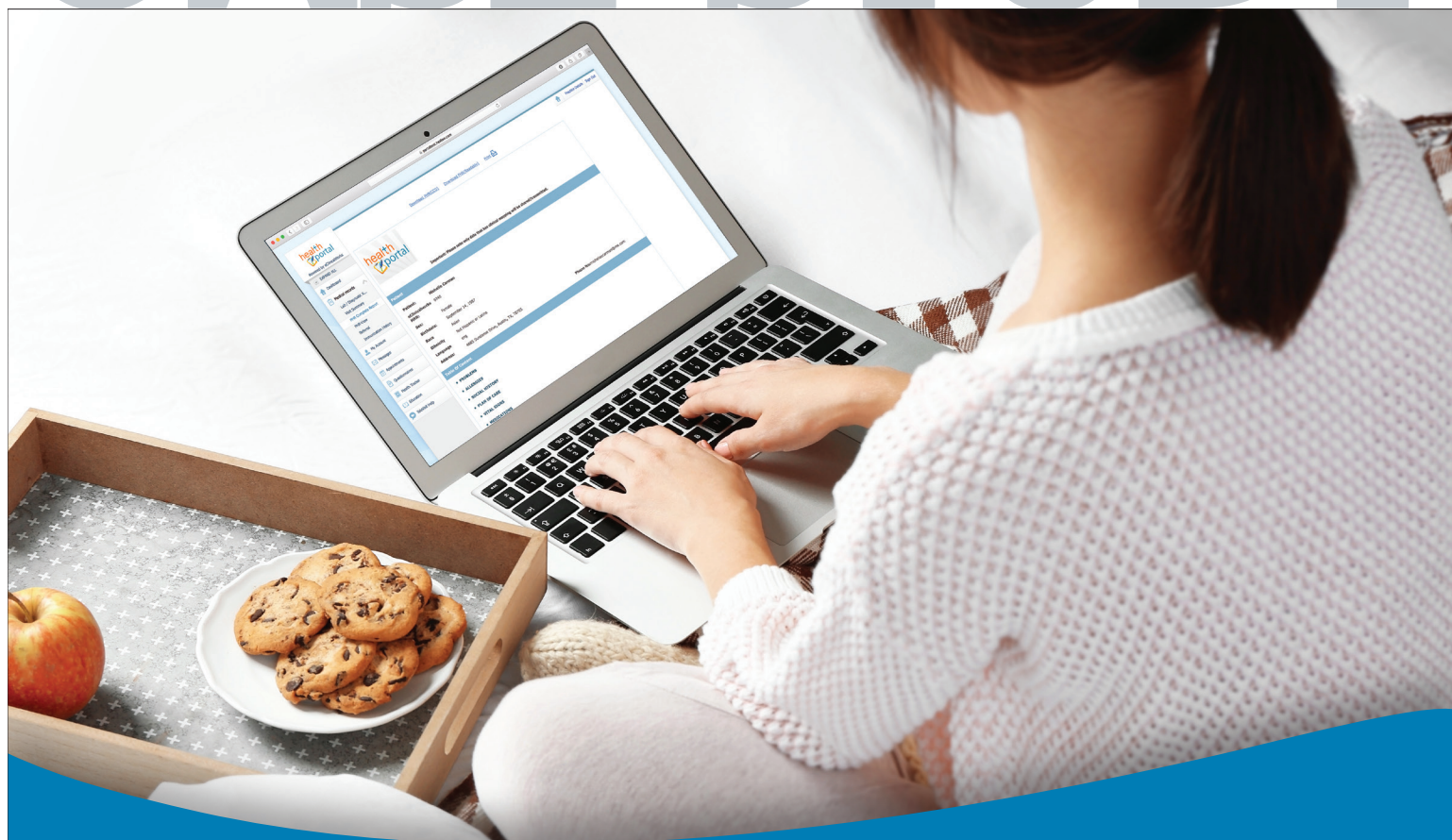


eClinicalWorks

CASE STUDY



GWINNETT CENTER MEDICAL ASSOCIATES

IMPLEMENTING CONVENIENCE FOR ALL

improving healthcare together

The Challenge

A small suburban Atlanta medical practice was burdened with hundreds of calls daily and needed a better way to serve patients seeking appointments and information without compromising the care provided to those already in the office.

The Solution

Office staff deployed engagement tools from eClinicalWorks, including Patient Portal, online booking, and healow apps, in order to encourage patients and providers to exchange information, privately and with greater convenience, both inside and outside of regular office hours.

The Results

Within a year of implementing Patient Portal, the practice had reduced the average number of daily phone calls from more than 500 to approximately 100 — a reduction of about 80% — while improving customer service and convenience.

Gwinnett Center Medical Associates

Putting Patient Portal to Work

Grappling With Success



Christopher S. Crooker, M.D.

Building a successful medical practice has always required attracting and retaining patients by providing quality care and earning the trust of one's community. But at a time when fewer medical professionals are choosing adult primary care — even as the medical needs of the U.S. population continue to grow — that success presents new challenges.

Rising patient volumes and changing payment and reimbursement models mean that providers are under greater pressure than ever to maximize the use of limited resources, beginning with the time they devote to each patient.

Gwinnett Center Medical Associates is a small suburban Atlanta medical practice, with four providers — one doctor and three mid-level providers — that sees an average of 130 patients daily.¹ Like many providers, Gwinnett's success can be measured in part by patient volume, a sure sign that an organization has earned the trust of the community it serves.

"You know, first thing, 8 o'clock Monday morning, the phones start ringing," says Shari Crooker, a registered nurse who has been Gwinnett's office manager for the last 13 years. "Everyone wants an appointment for that day or the next day and it's constant ringing off the hook — 'Can you hold, please? Please hold, please hold.' And by the time the tenth person gets on there, all the appointments are taken."

¹ <http://www.drcrooker.com>

That's a familiar story for many who, like Crooker, are on the front line of a medical office. In addition to the many routine and administrative tasks that fall to them, they are required to keep an eye on the needs of patients while remaining acutely aware of the strains that patient volume can place upon the practice's providers.

And studies show that those patient volumes are growing, in part because fewer medical students today consider primary care or internal medicine their first choice. An April 2011 article in JAMA Internal Medicine, for example, found a sharp decline in interest

Why is there a shortage of primary care physicians in the U.S.

Primary care physicians, those who cover comprehensive health needs and provide continuing care for their patients, were once the foundation of a high-value American healthcare system. But now there is a looming deficit of the very professionals healthcare reform depends upon. Why may primary care doctors soon become an endangered breed?

32%
Primary Care

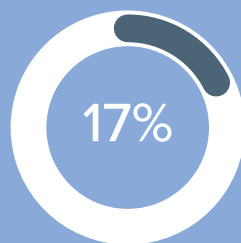


Only 32% of physicians in the U.S. are primary care providers, while 68% specialize in careers such as radiology, cardiology, and dermatology.

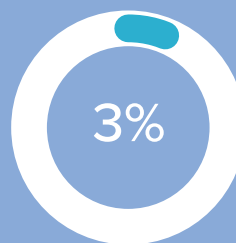
68%
Specialists

Recent surveys of GRADUATING MEDICAL SCHOOL SENIORS show that only a small fraction (22.7%) want to go into primary care medicine.

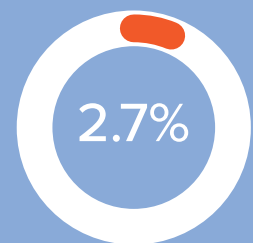
TYPE OF PRIMARY CARE DISCIPLINE THEY WISH PURSUE A CAREER IN



FAMILY MEDICINE



INTERNAL MEDICINE



PEDIATRICS

Almost 25% of primary care doctors are age 56 or older



And it's likely that many of these physicians will retire within the next decade.

Sources: Association of American Medical Colleges, Kaiser Health News, Medscape, Administration On Aging, American Academy Of Family Physicians, Council On Graduate Medical Education.

in primary care between 1990 and 2007 and estimates that only between 17% and 20% of today's medical students can expect to wind up in a career as a primary care doctor or internist.²

At the same time, patient volumes continue to grow, in part because of newly insured patients taking advantage of coverage extended to them under the Affordable Care Act. A 2015 survey by the Kaiser Family Foundation and Commonwealth Fund found that

59% of physicians, and 64% of nurse practitioners and physician assistants, saw an increase in the number of patients they served in the first year following implementation of the ACA.³

The inevitable result is larger patient panels.

A recent article in the Annals of Family Medicine notes that U.S. primary care physicians care for

an average of 2,300 patients, a number that is expected to rise as physicians continue to choose specialty medicine over general practice in coming years. The article cited three studies conducted by researchers at Duke University and concluded that in order to provide all the recommended acute, chronic, and preventive care services for a panel of 2,500 patients, a medical provider would have to work 21.7 hours per day.⁴

Common sense and simple math say that no practice, regardless of the talents of staff or their degree of efficiency, can possibly hope to achieve such figures.

"Before, you have a CDSS (Clinical Decision Support System)," said Crooker. "You have alerts, you have ways to alert you that a person is due, say, for a mammogram. But, a lot of times that is overlooked, because the patient is here and they've got so many other problems. You're dealing with their diabetes, you're dealing with their sinus infection, you're dealing with other issues. And those little health maintenance things kind of get overlooked no matter how well we see alerts in CDSS."

2 <http://archinte.jamanetwork.com/article.aspx?articleid=227186&version=meter+at+2&module=meter-Links&pgtype=Blogs&contentId=&mediald=%25%25ADID%25%25&referrer=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.google.com%2F&priority=true&action=click&contentCollection=meter-links-click>

3 <http://www.commonwealthfund.org/publications/issue-briefs/2015/jun/primary-care-providers-first-year-aca>

4 <http://www.annfammed.org/content/10/5/396.full>

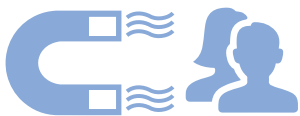
To address the appointment scheduling crunch, Shari Crooker decided to introduce eClinicalWorks' Patient Engagement tools and healow apps into the practice.



The Patient Engagement Issue

A growing body of evidence demonstrates that patients who are more actively involved in their healthcare experience better health outcomes and incur lower costs. As a result, many public and private healthcare organizations are employing strategies to better engage patients, such as educating them about their conditions and involving them more fully in making decisions about their care.

Patient Engagement: Why It Matters



Impacts Patient Retention

Patients who use the portal are nearly 2.6 times more likely to stay patients.

Improves Chronic Condition Management

Patient access to information and direct communication with providers can increase the quality of life for patients with chronic diseases.



Supports Timely Access to Care

Engagement can result in a level of education that

empowers patients to seek the right care at the right time.

Leads to Better Health Outcomes

Encouraging patients to participate in their own healthcare can result in better preventive care and improves medication adherence.



Fortunately, the complex demands that are placed upon medical providers today have been accompanied by a growing number of ever more sophisticated tools and techniques for helping to meet those demands.

Choosing Patient Engagement

The patient-provider relationship, Crooker notes, is changing in positive ways as practices — by both choice and necessity — incorporate more Patient Engagement tools into their daily routines.

“Technologically it’s bringing the patients more into the fold of the practice, of the doctor’s office,” Crooker said. “They’re not an outsider anymore. They’re more part of their healthcare.”

As the person with her finger on the pulse of the practice, Crooker could tell that Gwinnett was falling behind in certain ways.

“It’s hard to be on the phone, or have three or four people on the phone making appointments when we also have live patients in the office that we want to interact with,” she said.

To address the appointment scheduling crunch, Crooker decided to introduce

In some families, moms and dads are using the Portal not only for their own needs but are navigating to the accounts for their elderly parents and their children, thus greatly reducing the number of phone calls they need to place and the time they might otherwise spend on hold.

eClinicalWorks' Patient Engagement tools and healow apps into the practice.

"I put things all over the office," she said. "I would take the same Word document and I'd just post them in the rooms. I put them in the bathrooms. I put them at checkout, I put them at check-in. We would hand out fliers, especially when we started setting up the Portal, we would hand them out to patients at checkout."

Crooker was confident that the changes she had in mind were the right ones for the practice, but she admits that she did not know whether patients would actually embrace the Patient Portal.

"How would you if you don't present them with their options?" she said. "All I did was say, you know what, this is what I want to do. This is how I see our office is falling behind, or this is where I see our workflow is really bogging down. And here is a way I think we can fix it. Threw it out there. I just started sending email blasts out to all of our patients."

Promoting Portal to Patients

The results were not long in coming. On the patient side, the reception was enthusiastic and — somewhat to Crooker's surprise — it wasn't necessarily younger, allegedly tech-savvy patients who were the biggest advocates.

"The first two people I had sign up for the Patient Portal were in their 80s, and they use it to this day," she said. "And mostly it's the elderly people that I find use the Portal the most. It's easier for them. For some reason, they don't like voicemails, but they'll send these Portal messages. I guess they feel more in control. It's just easier, and it's more private, I think. It's more personal for them to be in front of their computer and type what they want to say, as opposed to leaving it on some voicemail."

Crooker finds that all age groups are now using the Patient Portal and other tools the practice provides.

“Patients go online and book their appointments at 2 o’clock in the morning or 8 o’clock at night, when we’re not even open,” she said. “It’s very easy to implement.”

In some families, moms and dads are using the Portal not only for their own needs but are navigating to the accounts for their elderly parents and their children, thus greatly reducing the number of phone calls they need to place and the time they might otherwise spend on hold.

That positive reception didn’t simply happen by itself.

“If you just sit there and say ‘We have a Patient Portal, figure it out yourself,’ well, who’s going to use that?” Crooker said. “You’ve got to promote it. You’ve got to make it seem like it’s the greatest thing in the world. And every practice should think it is. It’s going to decrease your workload. It’s going to increase the workflow of the office. It’s going to make your patients happier. It’s going to bring them into the whole picture. Promote it like that. I did the same when healow came out, and when trackers came out.”

Crooker said that the appointment scheduler remains the most popular feature, probably because it was the first tool that the practice promoted. But patients have also been using the Portal to view lab reports and other personal health information. And the latest trend is a move toward health trackers.

Just a month after Gwinnett notified its patients that they could use trackers such as FitBit, the practice saw a boom in the use of such devices as patients started keeping tabs on many aspects of their health, including blood pressure.

“They were just amazed that we offered them that technology too,” she said. “And then, we could see it wasn’t just a one-sided thing.”

That, of course, is the key to successful Patient Engagement — making it work for both patients and providers.

When Providers Embrace Portal

At the most fundamental level, Patient Engagement tools mean that providers can spend more of the limited time they have directly on what matters most, the care of their patients.

“It takes the burden off of my staff,” Crooker said. “It decreases their workload when the patients are able to schedule their own appointments, book their own appointments. When we don’t have to

do of all that ourselves, again, it's bringing the patients into their own healthcare. It definitely saves the doctors workflow time. Because the patients are doing half of it for them, basically."

In the past, Crooker said, laboratory work was extraordinarily tedious, meaning that providers were constantly dealing with a backlog of reports and results, leading to sometimes long delays in making such information available to their patients.

With the introduction of the Patient Portal, the practice realized that it made sense in many cases to publish lab results directly to the individual patient's Portal account.

"Patients don't have to wait and wait for the phone call from the doctor or the mid-level," Crooker said.

"They can go on the Portal within a couple of days and see the results, then they send us a message. They can get this message from the patient, 'Oh I saw my cholesterol is a little high, would you like me to change my medication?' It saves that provider from even having to make that telephone encounter for it. The patient's done the work for us. They have voiced their questions before the doctor even calls."

The point is not necessarily to reduce the overall workload on each medical provider — all of whom are as busy as ever — but to transform that quality of the time each provider is spending so that it maximizes the health benefits to the patients. Rather than go through lab results and a lot of

preliminaries when a patient does have an office visit, patient and provider alike can be on the same page before the visit ever begins.

"It's like, 'Oh, I see you gained some weight. What happened?'"

Well, they've put their notes on trackers, you can put notes in there and we can see those notes when they come in," Crooker said.

"Or we can say, you know, your activity has increased, this is great, but can you increase it a little bit more? Things like that, definitely I think improve their healthcare and their communication with their doctor. It's not just like you're syncing your FitBit and looking at your numbers — they really don't know what to do with them. But if a doctor or a provider can actually discuss those results, or what is happening with their activity, how awesome is that?"

In addition to Patient Portal, Gwinnett is making effective use of Messenger campaigns. The practice began by using that tool simply to send birthday greetings to patients, most of whom appreciate the personal touch. They then turned to a far more serious task: Identifying patients due for mammograms.

The results that Gwinnett has achieved through the use of Patient Engagement tools have made a real difference in the lives of patients and providers alike.

But those gains would not have been sustained had the practice not made a conscious effort to devote time formerly spent on the phone to more productive uses, including analysis of lab resources and maximizing the opportunity for online communications.

Measuring the Results

With Patient Portal, healow apps, and other patient tools firmly in place, there is no lack of anecdotal evidence about their effectiveness, popularity, and ease of use. But how can a practice measure their impact?

Fewer phone calls

At Gwinnett Center Medical Associates, the most obvious and immediately measurable impact was the reduction in phone traffic.

“A year-and-a-half before we went with eClinicalWorks, we changed our phone company over,” Crooker said. “And they were kind of stunned that I wasn’t lying when I said we got over 500 phone calls a day. Even though we’re a four-provider office, we see a lot of patients and refills,

labs, appointments, all these phone calls. And sure enough, we were getting over 500 phone calls a day. When we implemented Portal, within a year we were down to 100 phone calls a day.”

Faster lab analysis

The 80% reduction in phone traffic has yielded another benefit that all medical practices crave — time.

“Now, labs don’t come later,” Crooker said. “They come way sooner because I’ve got this RN who is extraordinarily wonderful and whom we trust looking at these first and publishing them to the Portal. Again, the patient becomes involved. They get to see these abnormal labs: ‘Oh, I noticed my TSH was 50, um, what am I going to do?’ Things like that. Again, it’s just faster, more efficient healthcare. When a provider couldn’t get to those labs for a week or so, now he’s getting to them within 24 to 48 hours.”

Effective Messenger campaigns

In addition to Patient Portal, Gwinnett is making effective use of Messenger campaigns. The practice began by using that tool simply to send birthday greetings to patients, most of whom appreciate the personal touch.

They then turned to a far more serious task: Identifying patients due for mammograms.

“And it’s been absolutely fantastic,” Crooker said. “We have had more compliance with mammograms since we started the campaign than we had during the previous seven years that we have had eClinicalWorks. With Messenger, as soon as you set that campaign, you don’t have to do it again. And it shoots those messages out to the patients — email, text, voice message, however you want to do it. Or all three. We use all three. And it alerts them that ‘Oh my gosh, my mammogram is due.’ Or ‘I had my mammogram at my GYN’s last year. And they’ll send me Portal messages on that, not a phone call.”

Providers don’t have any long messages to listen to on an answering machine. They simply log on to their computers, check their Portal messages, and can then respond to their patients.

Sustaining Better Healthcare

The results that Gwinnett has achieved through the use of Patient Engagement tools have made a real difference in the lives of patients and providers alike. But those gains would not have been sustained had the practice not made a conscious effort to devote time formerly spent on the phone to more productive uses, including analysis of lab resources and maximizing the opportunity for online communications.

Crooker said that once provider saw the benefits that Patient Portal and other tools could bring to the practice, they adopted them enthusiastically.

“They saw the messages going down,” she said. “The nurses saw they weren’t getting as many voicemails anymore.”

Once, patients and providers alike felt bound by the practice’s office hours. Today, all that has changed. Crooker encourages providers to remind their patients that they should sign up for Patient Portal and enjoy the options it provides.

“So you can contact me at 3 o’clock in the morning if you have insomnia,” she notes. “You can send me a Portal message on the weekend to let me know what your blood pressure is doing. Don’t wait until 8 o’clock on Monday. We’re not just an 8 to 5 office anymore. Yes, it’s 24 hours, what isn’t these days? We can get to those messages Monday through Friday, but the patients don’t feel that they’re confined to our office hours anymore, and I wanted the providers to promote that. Send me a Portal message. Are you signed up for the Portal? I hear them say that all the time.”

OK, perhaps not **every** patient. Crooker notes that Gwinnett has one patient who actually writes the practice a letter, sent through the U.S. mail, each time she needs her prescriptions refilled. And yes, that patient gets the same quality of service as anyone else, if a bit slower.

“But most people like technology,” Crooker concludes. “They want to make it easy for themselves. They want to be able to contact us. They want this.” ■

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Sustainable Healthcare Through Patient Engagement



The Patient Portal, powered by eClinicalWorks, provides a secure communication channel between you and your patients and allows patients to be proactive in the management of their own health. They can review their personal health records (PHR), view lab results, request refills of authorized prescriptions, request referrals, request education material, or simply ask general questions. Fully integrated with the healow app, patients can access their patient portal account securely and manage their family's healthcare anytime, anywhere.

Gwinnett Center Medical Associates, a small suburban Atlanta practice, knew they were succeeding because their phones never stopped ringing.

With just 32% of U.S. physicians in primary care — and fewer than a quarter of medical school seniors looking to enter the field — demand for the services of proven primary care providers like Gwinnett has been growing steadily, and is expected to grow for years to come.

Gwinnett challenged itself to get patients more involved in their own healthcare while reducing call volume so providers could focus on quality care in a more thoughtful way.

Office Manager Shari Crooker found the answers she needed through Patient Engagement tools from eClinicalWorks, including Patient Portal and healow apps.

A year after implementing Patient Portal, Gwinnett had reduced phone calls 80%, even as the practice remains as popular as ever. Using Messenger campaigns, the practice has also become more efficient with screening campaigns for mammograms and colonoscopies.

“Technologically it's bringing the patients more into the fold of the practice,” Crooker said. “They're not an outsider anymore. They're more part of their healthcare.”



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