Patient-Centered Healthcare
Delivering Better Outcomes with Employer On-site Health Centers

Healthcare has emerged as one of the most crucial and frustrating issues that Americans face today. Patient outcomes have not kept pace with healthcare costs, which have spiraled out of control.

A new approach to providing effective healthcare—patient-centered healthcare—has emerged as a promising alternative to the nation’s traditional healthcare model. Several diverse frameworks seek to implement patient-centered healthcare in different care settings by adopting practices that encourage better communication and collaboration between patients and care providers.

Evaluating the benefits of patient-centered healthcare is essential for employers. They can take advantage of innovative healthcare solutions that improve the health and wellness of their employees, lower healthcare costs, and reduce burdens for employers, employees, and care providers.

The Traditional Healthcare Model

In the U.S., healthcare traditionally has been focused on delivering reactive care. Most patients seek medical treatment only when it is absolutely necessary, for example, when they are suffering from illnesses or injuries. They generally allow doctors and other care providers to make most of the decisions about treatment and ongoing care for them. Patients trust that their doctors are providing the best care and appropriate treatment.

This traditional healthcare model places significant burdens on patients. When seeking care, they typically have to take time off from work, travel to a healthcare provider’s office, and sit in a waiting room. Patients often spend only a few minutes with doctors and other providers, who rush through appointments because of heavy patient loads. Patients must navigate a complicated healthcare system that requires them to deal with convoluted insurance rules and billing headaches. Committed and caring providers are also frustrated, lacking the time to provide their patients the comprehensive care that they are trained to deliver—and want to deliver.

As a result, too often patients leave a healthcare visit without completely understanding their diagnoses and the ongoing care plans recommended by medical professionals. They are uncertain about the best next steps. Because of their confusion, they may not follow through in caring for themselves. For example, they may not follow the instructions for prescribed medications properly or fail to schedule a follow-up appointment. As a result, a patient’s underlying health issues may go untreated.

In addition, when a patient does not like how their medication makes them feel, they
often will stop taking the medication and will not inform their doctor because it is so challenging to make contact. For example, patients who start taking blood pressure medication will often feel a slight increase in fatigue for the first few weeks. If they are unaware of this side effect because the physician lacked the time to discuss it with them during the visit, some patients will stop taking this extremely important medication. Their condition may worsen, and other conditions connected to high blood pressure may develop.

Runaway health costs are straining the traditional healthcare model, and increased spending on healthcare has not provided a corresponding improvement in patient health and wellness outcomes. With its focus on reactive medicine, the traditional system also provides inadequate preventive care—and chronic care identification and management—that could help people avoid many health issues and unnecessary expenses.

**The Patient-centered Healthcare Model**

To address the shortcomings of the traditional healthcare model, the healthcare industry is moving away from the status quo toward a patient-centered approach that reduces costs and provides better health outcomes. This patient-centered movement, which began in the 1990s, places an increased emphasis on patient experiences and perspectives and collaboration between patients and healthcare providers. It seeks to enable patients to take a more active role in their own medical care and wellness.  

The Institute of Medicine defines patient-centeredness as “healthcare that establishes a partnership among practitioners, patients, and their families (when appropriate) to ensure that decisions respect patients' wants, needs, and preferences and that patients have the education and support they need to make decisions and participate in their own care.”

One study concluded that patient-centered healthcare makes patients “feel known, respected, involved, engaged, and knowledgeable.” Other studies have shown that patient-centered care produces higher patient satisfaction rates.

Patient-centered healthcare improves communication by encouraging a partnership between patients and providers. Patients participate in making their own health and wellness decisions. They use advice from doctors and other healthcare providers and consider their own needs and preferences before agreeing to treatment and participating in ongoing care plans.

Patients experience better health outcomes—including reduced symptoms and fewer misdiagnoses because of poor communication—under patient-centered healthcare systems. Better communication between patients and providers also increases patient compliance with and understanding of treatment plans. Because of its resolute focus on patients and proactive care, patient-centered healthcare delivers preventive care more efficiently and effectively than the traditional healthcare model. It addresses the
triple-aim approach to healthcare: optimizing health, improving the patient experience, and controlling costs.\textsuperscript{9}

Patient-centered healthcare provides many other benefits, including:

- encouraging collaborative patient care by a team of professionals
- enabling providers to use technology and data to coordinate patient care
- providing patients access to health educational tools
- allowing patient care to involve family and friends (if desired)
- heightening awareness of other wellness aspects, such as spirituality

Patient-centered healthcare also lowers costs. Improved patient-provider communications helps providers make more accurate diagnoses and design more effective ongoing treatment plans. Studies have shown that providers following a patient-centered approach order fewer diagnostic tests, prescribe medications less often, issue fewer referrals, and recommend hospitalizations less frequently than those adhering to practices in the traditional healthcare model.\textsuperscript{10}

This is not to say that healthcare providers working in the traditional model do not have the right skills and goals. The issue is that the challenges of the current environment hinder clinicians in providing the patient-focused care that they have been trained to deliver. As a result, the traditional model may affect not only the care provided but also the clinician’s own work satisfaction.

**Providing Patient-centered Healthcare**

The healthcare industry has begun to transition to a patient-centered model in various ways. Two primary solutions to provide patient-centered healthcare have emerged: hospital centers and employer on-site health centers.

**Hospital Centers**

Some hospital centers have adopted practices that provide patient-centered care in their facilities. For example, they have created programs that allow family members to be present during doctor rounds and to stay with patients in intensive care units. Hospital centers have also redesigned patient rooms and other care environments to better serve patient needs.\textsuperscript{11}

Although some hospital centers have made great progress toward providing patient-centered healthcare for their patients, the successes are not widespread or readily available to patients in all areas of the country. Delivery of patient-centered healthcare in hospital centers also has not resolved two central disadvantages of the traditional healthcare system: employees having to take time off of work to travel to a healthcare provider and the complex insurance issues that burden everyone—employees, employers and providers. Fortunately, employers have another alternative to provide patient-centered healthcare for their employees.
On-site Health Centers

One of the most innovative and effective approaches to patient-centered healthcare is for employers to provide health and wellness services at centers located on or near their own sites. This solution offers patients convenient access to healthcare where they work and provides many benefits to employees, employers and care providers.

On-site health centers can offer employees a holistic, patient-centered approach to healthcare, focused not only on illness and chronic care but also on preventive care, health maintenance, and wellness. Doctors, physician assistants, or nurse practitioners treat illnesses and injuries and offer ongoing treatment for chronic conditions. Some centers also offer wellness programs and dispense generic medications.

As patients, employees have shorter waits and longer appointments, giving them time to talk to providers. This additional time helps build a stronger relationship and a partnership that improves clinical outcomes. When patients have time to talk with the clinician, they are more likely to feel like a true partner in their care—rather than passively receiving a prescription, a care plan or medical advice.

Patients may also have access to on-site health education meetings, as well as 24/7 online health information. Employees can use these resources to learn about medical issues, such as health risk factors. When individuals understand what is important to keep themselves healthy—and also have a clinical partner that provides support when they struggle—outcomes can only improve. Some employers expand on-site healthcare access to include retirees and employee dependents.

Employers can lower their healthcare costs by adopting on-site health centers. On-site health centers minimize direct medical costs by lowering labor, medical supply, and medication costs. In addition, by preventing downstream expenditures caused by undiagnosed health risks and conditions, both employers and employees experience long-term cost savings. Creating a healthier employee workforce can increase productivity by reducing lost work time and absenteeism due to doctor visits and undertreated health issues.

Some on-site centers also offer employees annual health risk assessments, which provide early warnings about potential health issues. Because of such factors as time constraints and the high cost of medical care, many people have limited contact with the healthcare system. Annual risk assessments can help identify “silent killers,” such as high blood pressure, and prevent the onset of serious ailments. Not only do risk assessment change employees’ lives for the better, they also help employers avoid high claim costs in the future.

Benefits for Employers, Employees and Providers

On-site health and wellness centers provide benefits for all parties involved: employers, employees and providers. Employers lower their healthcare costs, and employees
receive quality care at their convenience and may also enjoy lower out-of-pocket expenses. Providers no longer carry the burden of handling paperwork and negotiating the insurance system for payment. This enables them to fulfill the role that attracted them to the healthcare profession in the first place: caring for people. Providers can focus even more closely on their patients’ health management and treatment plans.

Healthcare has become a major cost for employers, and expenses continue to rise. By keeping employees healthy and reducing their time away from work, an effective on-site health and wellness center can deliver significant cost savings to employers, particularly when a company partners with a health and wellness service provider.

Employers can realize significant savings, not only through treatment of illnesses and injuries but also by enhancing preventive care and encouraging lifestyle changes to reduce the number of unnecessary visits employees make to doctors’ offices and emergency rooms. This may also reduce the number of hospital admissions, surgical and nonsurgical, secondary to better health.

With access to an on-site health and wellness center, employees don’t waste employer or personal time traveling to and from doctors’ offices and pharmacies, where they may also have to endure long wait times. Instead, employees have convenient access—either within or near their workplace—to a full suite of holistic, patient-centered services: primary care, preventive care, wellness services, and pharmaceutical dispensing where allowed.

Working for an on-site health and wellness center allows healthcare providers to spend more time with patients. Changing from a system that financially rewards quantity over quality to one that focuses on patient centric care, not only frees them from the burden of dealing with third-party payer systems, but it allows the providers to focus on holistic healthcare and not illness care. They are then able to spend time on the most rewarding part of their jobs—making patients healthier.

Assessing Providers

Organizations considering an on-site employee health and wellness center should ask prospective providers about their range of services. Does the provider offer these patient-centered healthcare services:

- primary care
- preventive care
- educational resources and incentive programs that encourage and empower employees to achieve their health goals
- wellness services that encourage employees to adopt positive lifestyle behaviors that will lead to improved physical and mental well-being
- health coaches who work with employees to set health and wellness goals
- medication dispensing for both acute disease treatment and chronic disease management when allowable
- lab results that employees can easily understand, for example, by using color-coded graphs that clearly convey results
Taking the Next Step

If your organization is considering changing its healthcare strategy, it should consider moving to a more holistic, patient-centered approach that overcomes the weaknesses of the traditional healthcare model. Many patient-centered options already exist, offering employers the opportunity to reduce costs while providing effective healthcare to their employees.

For many employers, establishing an on-site healthcare center is the optimal way to provide sustainable patient-centered healthcare. For patients, seeking healthcare is less complicated, and they have shorter waits and longer appointments with care providers. Patients also gain a better understanding of their treatment plans and take a more active role in their own health. By delivering the full spectrum on healthcare including acute care, preventive care and wellness programs, on-site health centers produce a healthier, happier workforce and reduce costs for employers.

CareHere, a leading patient-centered healthcare provider, partners with employers—both small and large—to help their employees improve health and wellness through innovative, quality, cost-effective healthcare solutions. For example, CareHere has established an on-site health and wellness centers for a school district in Tennessee with more than 1,600 employees. From 2008 to 2015, the agency’s cumulative savings exceeded $8.4 million, which equated to an ROI of $2.05 for every dollar invested. In a 12-month period (2014–15), the on-site center saved the agency more than $1.3 million in office visit cost off-sets. The agency’s healthcare plan achieved broad employee participation: More than 1,800 patient health goals were created, the agency had a 95 percent participation rate in its health risk assessment program, and employees made more than 1,379 CareHere health coach contacts. “The health risk assessment process we use in our clinics has saved lives and made our staff healthier and more productive. Our employees have a very cost effective way to help our district keep premiums low while gaining access to good healthcare through CareHere,” the district’s deputy director of schools stated.

To learn more about how on-site health centers can help make your healthcare expenditures more effective and efficient, contact us.

References


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