A Tool to Evaluate your Website for Patient Engagement

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Abstract

Introduction: The current healthcare environment encourages patients to participate in their healthcare. One way to do so is to design and manage a website that empowers patients and family members to be involved in their care. The authors previously developed a model that classifies hospital websites into four levels by how well the websites engaged the patients. This paper presents a tool based on that model that can be used by hospitals to objectively measure the level of hospital website patient engagement.

Method: The tool was developed and given to 20 students in a senior-level management information systems course to evaluate 40 hospital websites taken from the 2012 Most Wired Hospitals list. Based on their comments, the tool was revised to increase readability and usability.

Results: The tool can: (1) correctly identify the current level of engagement of a hospital's website; (2) prescribe the characteristics required to advance the website to the next level while still allowing for flexibility in website design.

Implications for practice: This tool can assist hospitals in evaluating their current website from several points of view, point out potential shortcomings, and serve as an aid in developing a plan to improve the website going forward.

Keywords: Patient engagement, Quality improvement, Hospital websites, Evaluation tool, Healthcare research

Introduction

The healthcare industry is encouraged to develop and implement technology to computerize the healthcare system and engage patients in their care through the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act and the Health Information Technology for Economic and Clinical Health Act. It was recognized that directly engaging patients and families through the use of electronic health records is critical to achieving technology's promise of improving the health and care of patients.¹⁻³ To this end, hospitals can employ the Internet and their website to enable patients to involve themselves in their electronic health record.⁴

Generation Z (persons born between 1995 and 2012), which is coming of age, has never known a world without the Internet. They are technically savvy and comfortable with Facebook, Twitter, online banking, and anything to do with communicating via the Internet.⁵,⁶ Concurrently, data from the Pew Internet and the American Life Project indicate that as of April 2012, half of American adults 65 and over are going online. Of these seniors who go online, 70% use the Internet on a typical day.⁶

Given that people are using the Internet, it becomes important to have a well-designed hospital website to communicate with all patients and customers. Robeznieks⁵ found that most consumers want a website that increases the credibility of the hospital and conveys trust in the services it provides. They wanted to see what the hospital's current quality of service was and to respond to the service they had received by contributing to the hospital’s ratings. Lastly, they conveniently wanted to shop for services offered at the hospital, access provider information, and clarify insurance plans honored.

Healthcare websites could be an integral part of a quality improvement program of an institution. Consumer perception of hospital quality encourages and empowers consumers to become partners in their healthcare decisions. Patients feel empowered when they have all of the information needed to