

Post-discharge telephone calls: Improving the communication gap between patients, families and healthcare providers

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Patient-centred care

The concept of patient-centred care (PCC) is not new, having been introduced over 50 years ago in response to the biomedical model of care. The biomedical model of care focused on disease and failed to encompass the whole person's experiences, omitting psychological and social components of disease.¹ Traditionally, doctors were regarded as dominant and able to decide what was in the patient's best interest; however, in recent years, healthcare has moved towards an informed model of care where patients act as partners and are provided with relevant information to make informed decisions.¹

The participation of patients in the care process has important benefits for patients, families, communities, and hospital organizations.^{2,3} Patients who participate in their own care are more likely to adhere to and respond better to their treatment regimens,^{4,5} maintain a relationship with a specific healthcare provider,^{2,4,5} and follow the healthcare provider's advice.^{2,3} This can improve health outcomes, leading to such things as better diagnosis and treatment results, fewer complications, and a decrease in frequency of hospitalization and length of stay.^{2,3,5}

PCC encompasses a variety of interventions including but not limited to: patient-physician communication; pain management; discharge planning; engagement in decision-making; and the care environment.²⁻⁷ Kennedy et al.⁷ implemented rounding, post-discharge calls, and improved discharge instructions in a hospital setting. Through these interventions, the hospital saw an increase in overall quality of care ratings and satisfaction scores. The nurses, for instance, found that a number of patients did not understand their discharge instructions when they returned home, and the post-discharge calls were able to address the patients' concerns.⁷ Research has demonstrated that post-discharge telephone calls are an excellent way to promote

PCC and encourage patient-physician communication.^{7,8}

With a renewed focus on PCC and the participation of patients in the care process, patients are becoming more effective managers of their own care.³ For this reason, having patients as partners in healthcare is becoming increasingly important for healthcare organizations.³ and conducting post-discharge telephone calls will help to elevate the quality of care that patients receive even when they are discharged home.

Post-discharge telephone calls

The post-discharge period is a time of vulnerability and dissatisfaction for many patients, as patients and their families are re-adjusting to life outside of the hospital.⁸ During this time, patients are expected to adhere to discharge instructions, which often include complex detailed medication routines and follow-up appointments.⁸ This demand on patients is amplified by the physical and emotional stress of recovery, along with the stress of transitioning home.⁸ In a recent study, nearly a quarter of general medical inpatients had one of three outcomes during the post-discharge period: they passed away; were re-admitted; or presented to the emergency department within 30 days.⁹ The high re-admission rates were attributed to poor communication between patients and physicians during the discharge process.⁹ Furthermore, during the post-discharge period, it has also been found that one in five patients experiences an adverse event, drug events being the most commonly cited.¹⁰ That being said, post-discharge telephone calls are an excellent way to improve communication between the care provider and the patient. Follow-up calls are made from the healthcare provider to the patient 24-72 hours after the patient is discharged from the hospital.⁸ These calls are generally made by a nurse, and they have been reported to decrease re-admission rates, reduce adverse events, improve communication ►

between the patient and the healthcare provider, and improve patient satisfaction.⁸

Knowledge exchange

Post-discharge telephone calls allow for knowledge exchange by increasing communication between the healthcare provider and the patient. These calls allow the patient to be at the front of their own care, ensuring that the patient has understood the discharge instructions through the use of the teach-back method.^{2, 4-6, 8-10} For this reason, post-discharge telephone calls have a number of benefits including: improved patient satisfaction; a decreased number of patients who miss their follow-up appointments; and improved patient understanding and observance of discharge instructions.^{2, 4, 8-10}

Unfortunately, research supports that only a fraction of discharged patients are reached through post-discharge calls for a number of reasons, including: no response from the patient; incorrect telephone number in the system; and competing interests in the hospital.¹⁰ For this reason, it would be beneficial to hire staff or to use modified workers to run a post-discharge call program to ensure the maximum number of patients can be reached. Although there are competing interests, the extensive literature suggests that making the call to the patient is important due to the many benefits that these calls have to offer, including the opportunity for knowledge exchange.²⁻⁷

In conclusion, post-discharge telephone calls have important implications for PCC and knowledge exchange in the community. These calls show promise for improving

outcomes in clinical areas, as they help confirm that discharge and medication instructions were understood, as well as remind the patient to follow up with their family physician. Having a process to connect with patients once discharged home from the hospital will lead to better outcomes for the patients and will also demonstrate the organization's focus on PCC. ■

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