COVID-19: A crisis of public health and patient trust

How Providence engaged patients and brought them back to a new normal
Health systems across the country have been forced to assuage patients’ fears related to COVID-19 and assure them that they can— and should—continue to safely seek care in acute settings. That has resulted in massive marketing and education campaigns, expedited the use of telehealth and patient outreach technology, and forced health systems to move at a lightning pace to solve problems. COVID-19 has demanded significant clinical and operational resources, and providers’ financial health has struggled as a result of declining revenue, in large part due to canceled or deferred elective surgeries. In general, the pandemic is resulting in a dramatic shift of care to virtual and home settings, changing not only how patients experience care, but also how clinicians do their job. While all of this change is significant and coming at an unprecedented pace, it presents a timely opportunity to move forward with a new model for healthcare delivery that engages patients and involves them in their own care.

Like leaders at many healthcare organizations, executives at Renton, Wash.-based Providence were concerned that, if they don’t take significant action, patients may defer surgeries for months—or perhaps indefinitely—which could lead to a decline in both revenue and patient outcomes. The health system was at a crossroads: does one of the nation’s largest health systems continue to operate under the status quo, and hope that patients feel comfortable enough to return for important care? Or should leaders address the issue head-on and capitalize on this opportunity to improve the patient experience?

As a system that is known for innovation and digital transformation, Providence didn’t hesitate. It partnered with Medline to develop a solution that leverages the electronic health-record, patient outreach technology and advanced manufacturing to regain patient trust and engage patients to play a more significant role in their own clinical outcome. Bolstered by a pandemic that has required immediate industry disruption, Providence and Medline partnered to develop a pre-surgical bundle program that educates patients about the steps the health system is doing to keep them safe and gives them tools to enable a safe, effective procedure, both before and during their hospital visit.
Providence and the COVID-19 Crisis

First and foremost, health systems faced a safety challenge in fighting the COVID-19 pandemic: they had to drastically change processes and procedures to ensure they could treat a significant influx of COVID-19 patients while preventing cross-infection with other patients. As many hospitals learned how to best accomplish this and put processes in place, they were faced with a more complex challenge: regaining patient trust.

“Our initial hypothesis was that COVID-19 had a negative impact on patient confidence to return to our facilities for routine care and elective surgical procedures, especially in the acute care setting,” said Dave Walker, senior vice president and chief resource officer for Providence’s Resource, Engineering and Hospitality Group. “As we were exploring how we could return patient confidence to pre-COVID levels, we started talking about what we could proactively provide our patients that would assure them it’s safe to receive care and ‘ease their way’ to return to our facilities.”

“COVID is a big motivator because we want to see patients return and feel confident, and we want our patients to feel healthy,” said Kirsten Juul-Music, a respected program manager at Providence who was selected by system leadership to manage this project because of her experience in enabling rapid innovation and system collaboration. “It was a huge motivating force to make sure that our communities can come get the care they need and so that people are not suffering at home afraid to get the care they need.”

Although Providence and Medline had for some time been focused on a program that would improve the pre-surgery experience and reduce surgical site infections (SSIs), COVID-19 gave the program a new impetus.

Clearly, COVID has created a need to enhance how we help patients prepare for their surgery by re-engineering supply channels that create a seamless flow of products and information delivered to their door,” Walker said. “As a business partner with Medline, we are dedicated to continually and proactively adapting our supply channels to meet the changing needs of our patients.”

Central Tenets of the Partnership

- A partnership built on trust
- Transparency
- Focused on the same goal of reassuring patients that it’s safe to get the care they need.
- Increase the use of telehealth, as this has been an important and growing platform
- Design bundles that are Providence-branded, to promote patient engagement and loyalty
- Design a system that meets Providence and Medline’s joint goals and does not impede on current clinical workflow
How a pre-surgical bundle is transformed into a reassuring patient experience

**Providence and Medline collaborated** to create a pre-surgical bundle that would not only ensure patients are properly prepped for surgeries, but also ensure they were prepared to contribute to a safe patient experience during COVID-19. Like past projects Medline has developed in this area, the bundles were to contain branded education materials, bottles of Chlorhexidine gluconate body wash, bathing mitts and a two-minute sand timer to help patients properly complete the bath. However, this program builds upon Medline’s past success with these types of bundles by adding PPE for patients to limit transmission of COVID-19, automating orders of the bundles using data from Providence’s EHR and adding a patient engagement component through email and video.

Once a patient’s surgery is scheduled, automation triggers a domino effect of processes, as data from the EHR is automatically submitted to a digital health platform called Xealth. Xealth uses an algorithm to process the data and trigger the shipping of a pre-surgical bundle and communication with the patient, the latter being conducted by Twistle, a care path communication platform. The process is fully automated—it doesn’t require any additional steps of the appointment scheduler.

An SMS message, sent via Twistle, contains a video of Dr. Amy Compton-Phillips, chief clinical officer at Providence, that not only makes patients aware of the bundle that is now heading their way, but also educates them on the steps that the health system is taking to keep patients safe during the pandemic.

These enhancements make the bundle a critical touchpoint for Providence to reengage patients and maintain trust in Providence’s commitment to always put patient safety first.

**Providence Pre-op Project Order Process**

- **Requires surgery**
- **Communication to patient**
- **Twistle SMS carepath including Providence Welcome Video**
- **Patient receives kit/bundle**
- **Patient receives survey**

**SIU Feed:** Scheduling Information Unsolicited (SIU) messages are used to communicate information about a patient’s appointment from the hospital scheduling system to a physician or clinic’s practice management system. SIU messages are a part of the HL7 Standard.

**SMS:** Short Message Service is a text messaging service available on most telephones, internet and mobile device systems.

**Twistle:** Keeps patients on track with confirmation and reminders. Prior to surgery the patient is instructed to use the CHG bathing supplies via SMS reminder.

**Xealth:** Filters data and sends email communications.

Understand the terminology: SIU Feed: Scheduling Information Unsolicited (SIU) messages are used to communicate information about a patient’s appointment from the hospital scheduling system to a physician or clinic’s practice management system. SIU messages are a part of the HL7 Standard.
This program demonstrates how health systems can engage patients in their own outcomes and continue to build a positive relationship, even as more care shifts to the home and virtual settings.

“More than just the video, communication in general is important. It’s a way to make sure patients understand why we’re doing what we’re doing,” Compton-Phillips said. “The ‘why’ and the ‘what’ are essential to building that bedrock of trust and showing patients that this is designed to make care safer and make life easier.”

The Twistle platform also confirms with the patient whether they received the bundle and sends the patient a survey following the procedure, closing the feedback loop and ensuring the program’s success. If the patient did not receive the bundle when they were supposed to, they’re immediately prompted to contact Providence, and a team at Providence is also proactively alerted. Staff were trained on how this process works, but automation allows it to work smoothly and enables staff to focus on more complex tasks.

Within the bundle, the “surgery prep kit” contains information and supplies for patients to prepare for their surgery, and the “safety kit” contains information and supplies to reduce the risk of COVID-19 transmission.

Because this new process is automated and doesn’t create significant additional work, it was easy to gain buy-in from staff. That was important, as perioperative teams were already busy dealing with frequently changing COVID-19 guidelines and pre-surgery testing challenges.

“All of the sites volunteered and there was a ton of enthusiasm and motivation,” Juul-Music said. “We never had to pull teeth or beg for engagement, which is a testament to the importance of this work and how invested people are in it, even though they’re very busy.”

The bundle program also offered a touchpoint for Providence to introduce patients to its new visual identity, with a newly designed logo and color scheme.
An important tool for clinicians that goes beyond surgical outcomes

The bundle serves an important purpose in resolving unnecessary variation in the pre-operative prep that patients undergo before surgery, as there has historically been variation in the products and instructions used, as well as patient compliance—especially when patients have been required to pick up or purchase their own supplies.

Providence is hopeful that the bundles may not only reduce SSIs, but also improve overall patient engagement in the pre-op process, including diet instructions and other directives.

But beyond the bundle’s inherent value in improving outcomes, clinical leaders involved in the project say the program’s role in improving patient-provider trust cannot be understated, as that plays a critical role in care.

“If a doctor can’t trust what a patient is saying, and the patient can’t trust doctor’s advice, you can’t have an effective healing relationship,” Compton-Phillips said. “Patients won’t follow doctor advice and doctors are less likely to accurately treat the condition at hand. Trust is the bedrock we base our care on.”

The program not only makes it easier for the patient to do what is right, but builds trust in the health system and assures patients that they will be safe. This is important for patients who worry they may become infected with COVID-19 and be worse-off after coming in for a procedure that is intended to make them well, said Dr. Braden Batkoff, senior vice president of clinical program services at Providence.

“As we move forward toward a patient-centered delivery system, trust is a main component, and coming out of the COVID surge, what our patients were telling us is that they don’t feel safe coming back to doctors’ offices and hospitals,” Batkoff said. “They’re concerned about the virus and want to be kept safe. So, we embarked on a mission to regain patients’ trust.”

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AMY COMPTON-PHILLIPS
CHIEF CLINICAL OFFICER, PROVIDENCE

Restoring patient confidence in the safety of our care facilities is not about just getting back to the way things used to be. It’s about treating patients at the right time so they can avoid having emergency situations.”

DR. JIMMY CHUNG
AVP, PERIOPERATIVE CLINICAL PERFORMANCE GROUP
PROVIDENCE

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DR. BRADEN BATKOFF
SVP, CLINICAL PROGRAM SERVICES, PROVIDENCE
In gaining patient buy-in regarding their surgery, the bundles also help address same-day cancellations and no-shows, a consistent problem both before and during the pandemic, as patients occasionally get nervous about their procedure, regardless of whether COVID is a factor, said Dr. Jimmy Chung, associate vice president of Providence’s perioperative clinical performance group. Delaying important surgery can have a significant impact on clinical outcomes—Providence clinical leaders have observed that, while elective surgeries may be down in 2020, emergency surgery volume is higher than it was in 2019, which may mean patients are delaying surgery until their condition becomes critical.

“My concern is patients are going to wait too long to have their surgeries that by the time they come to surgery they’ll be coming in with higher acuity,” Chung said. “Restoring patient confidence in the safety of our care facilities is not about just getting back to the way things used to be. It’s about treating patients at the right time so they can avoid having emergency situations.”

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JIM ABRAMS
COO, MEDLINE

3,823 bundles distributed by Medline

61% of surgical procedures are eligible for pre-surgical bundle

3,583 views of welcome video featuring Dr. Amy Compton-Phillips

95% of patients completed welcome video

85% of patients said the bundle made them feel more comfortable with their upcoming surgery

*The data represented above was gathered from six initial pilot hospitals in October and November 2020*
There isn’t a ‘one-size-fits-all’ approach to regaining patient trust—every health system and community is different.”

ANDY MILLS
PRESIDENT, MEDLINE

Unique provider-supply partner relationships will drive the industry forward, through COVID-19 and beyond

While this pre-surgical bundle program represents a noteworthy innovation that will improve both perioperative outcomes and the patient experience, the significance of the partnership that Medline and Providence have built can’t be understated. Leaders at both organizations agreed that the entire team acted upon mutual interests and goals, oriented around enabling efficient and effective care while remaining good stewards of each other’s businesses.

“Our strategic partnership was built on being good stewards of each other’s business. If it doesn’t make sense for Medline or it doesn’t make sense for Providence, we tend not to do it, in the true spirit of partnership,” Walker said. “When you take meaningful actions that actually demonstrate your intention to live up to the tenets of the partnership, people see things more practically, come together collaboratively and resist the natural temptation to overly rely on formal contract language. Instead, they work together to get the job done with zealous advocacy for the patient.”

“Medline has staff that sit in on steering committees and workgroups— they really approached this as a partnership,” Juul-Music said. “There are four organizations on these calls, but it doesn’t feel like it at all, it feels like we are simply just four different departments within the same organization.”

Medline President Andy Mills said that the COVID-19 pandemic has brought Medline even closer to its health system partners, as they’ve been challenged to work together to develop innovative, customized solutions to unprecedented challenges. It has reiterated the importance of an education and engagement in ensuring positive clinical outcomes.

“There isn’t a ‘one-size-fits-all’ approach to regaining patient trust—every health system and community is different,” Mills said. “We’re proud of how closely and collaboratively we’ve worked with our health system partners like Providence to engage patients, bringing them back into the health system and enabling them to take action for their health.”

“Our partnership is deep and extensive and centers around trust and collaboration,” said Medline COO Jim Abrams.

The best practices of this partnership provide a framework for success in performance improvement endeavors across disciplines and beyond the pandemic. If “Act One” was reaction to the COVID-19 pandemic, and addressing health inequities and economic crises, and “Act Two” was health system recovery and the resumption of elective care, this program lays the foundation for “Act Three,” Compton-Phillips says, as health systems look to build a better health system after the crisis subsides.

“We knew that before COVID hit in 2020 that we had more expensive care, worse outcomes and less equitable care across the U.S.,” Compton-Phillips said. “As we start reimagining what the system can be post-COVID, we are now asking ourselves, how do we make it better than before?”
ABOUT MEDLINE

Medline is a global manufacturer and distributor serving the healthcare industry with medical supplies and clinical solutions that help customers achieve both clinical and financial success. Headquartered in Northfield, Ill., the company offers 400,000+ medical devices and support services through more than 1,400 direct sales representatives who are dedicated points of contact for customers across the continuum of care. For more information on Medline, visit www.medline.com or connect with us on social media.