Systemness: Leadership From Vision To Reality

How Providers Can Gain System Adoption Despite Size, Scale and Complex Cultural Differences
Dear Reader,

As healthcare providers, we are tasked with ensuring that we provide our patients with the highest quality care and best experience. This is no small feat in an environment with significant cost pressures and changing landscape. At Dignity Health, we believe in Humankindness, the idea that through human connection we are able to open the path to healing. And we understand that one of the things everyone wants when they receive medical care is to be treated like a person and not like a patient. When I started as the Chief Nurse Executive for our system, I quickly discovered that we had different pre-surgical processes across our system of 40 hospitals across 3 states. All of them were very good at making sure patients had the important information they needed prior to surgery, but very few included a plan that was personalized to each individual patient. That is why one of the first clinical initiatives we started was to develop a pre-surgical prep kit. In partnership with Medline, it establishes consistency across our system, focusing on providers developing a human connection with patients and providing personalized care according to patient needs.

It is also well-documented that infection reduction is a major priority across health systems. Dignity Health decided to hone in on surgical site infections (SSIs) because we believe this is an opportunity to reduce preventable infections. So we developed a program that helps prepare our patients for their surgery in exactly the same way in all of our 40 hospitals. To do this, we needed to make sure the SSI kits were easy to use and readily available for all of our patients. And through our “systemness,” we also created a consistent pre-surgical process that is inviting for patients to use and easy to understand. The early results reveal promising improvements. Our data showed that in one year, this program prevented 43 surgical site infections alone, saving $1.2 M in associated costs.

I am excited to share our Dignity Health story with you here. In the following pages, we walk through step-by-step how we developed and executed our program to reduce SSIs across our health system. It took a dedicated team, a committed partner in Medline, and scores of frontline staff who listened, observed, and solicited feedback from the patients and clinical team in spirit of continuous improvement. I am grateful for the support from our system leaders in developing a solution that meets the needs of our diverse patient population. The journey also opened our eyes to the many barriers to care that some of our patients must overcome and reinforced our commitment to our healing ministry.

It is my hope that the lessons we’ve learned and the success of this program will inspire our colleagues across health systems and across the country to continue to improve the patient experience. After all, we are charged with serving their medical needs, and we cannot do that without putting them at the center of everything we do.

I truly believe that collaborations like this are the key to improving the lives of the communities we are privileged to serve. Together, we can and will improve health in America.

Sincerely,

Page West
System Chief Nurse Executive
Dignity Health
**Introduction**

By implementing systemness, healthcare providers ensure that patients have the same experience and get the same high quality of care no matter where in an organization they receive care. Hoping to realize this objective, Dignity Health began rolling out a systemwide initiative in late 2016 that aimed to reduce surgical-site infections. The project was nearly two years in the making. The goal was broader than preventing infections – the project was an ideal vehicle for moving forward with hospital leaders’ vision of building system thinking, or “systemness,” across the 40-hospital organization, headquartered in San Francisco.

The project would demonstrate that standardizing processes and protocols across Dignity Health could improve patients’ outcomes, patient experience and staff engagement, all while reducing costs. Beyond that benefit, systemness stands to break down silos and unite staff as they work toward the same organizational goals.

Now the results of the project are in, and they show that systemness can accomplish those objectives. Among the four CMS-reportable infections that were measured (Colon, Hips, Knees and Abdominal Hysterectomy), the project prevented 43 surgical site infections in 2017 for a cost savings of over $1.2 million. The kit also dramatically improved the patient experience – nearly all patients surveyed agreed that the kit was important to their care and easy to use.

But bringing together staff at 40 hospitals spread across three states to accomplish that success was no small feat. This white paper offers the Dignity Health project as a strong example of system-wide adoption and extracts key takeaways that can apply to similar initiatives across the healthcare industry.

**Tackling Initial Challenges**

This particular project was centered around the patient and the process leading up to surgery. Dignity Health and Medline, the largest privately held manufacturer and distributor of medical supplies, created a patient-facing kit to support the patient at home while they prepared for their surgery. The kit was aimed at standardizing pre-operation instructions in hopes of reducing SSIs and creating more consistent outcomes. The successful implementation of the kit throughout Dignity Health’s facilities serves as an illustration of how the system has fostered systemness in a thoughtful and calculated way. A task force of 20 stakeholders from a variety of Dignity Health departments and Medline worked together to develop the pre-surgery skin prep kit based on the best available medical evidence. The kits were deployed through a process that was open to feedback and amenable to change as leaders worked to overcome challenges in standardizing results.

The size of Dignity Health and differences in resources and care processes across facilities posed immediate challenges to achieving systemness through this project. Most notably, some hospitals have pre-op clinics where the skin prep kits can be handed out, but others don’t, which meant leaders had to develop an alternative process to provide kits to those patients.

Skin prep processes and instructions also varied widely from location to location. For example, some facilities had previously handed out cleansing wipes to patients, while others instructed patients to buy a skin cleansing product at their local drugstore. Distribution of the products and education was particularly difficult for patients that lived far away from the hospital. Differences in patient populations across the system also presented a significant challenge: Dignity Health patients vary widely by language, culture, socioeconomics and education levels, and leaders were intent on creating a solution that could effectively serve all patients.

The way the task force developed and designed the Dignity Health-branded kits resolved many of those issues. Among other items, the kits include two bottles of Chlorhexidine Gluconate (CHG) wash, and a booklet with standardized, easy-to-understand patient instructions and educational information. At a time when patients often turn to the internet for answers, the printed materials make sure patients receive validated information that clinicians consider
important. Inclusion of the wash meant that every patient receives it, that the product is approved by Dignity Health clinical leaders, and that patients, especially those with low incomes, no longer have to buy it themselves.

“The nice thing about the project was we could standardize the process across the company and ensure that every patient — no matter their language, no matter their socioeconomics — is going to receive the kit,” said Janet Holdych, Dignity Health’s vice president of quality. “It is huge to take the burden off them.”

Streamlining Implementation Through Communication and Collaboration

“The importance of constant communication with stakeholders at individual hospitals before, during and after project rollout can’t be overstated,” said Patty Armond, R.N., senior director of perioperative services at Mercy General Hospital and chair of the project committee. “Even when you think you’ve told them enough, you need to tell them again and you need to tell them more.”

Communication should come in many formats — one-on-one meetings, group meetings, personal phone calls and email. Armond said one-on-one conversations were particularly important for operating room directors, as these meetings gave them the opportunity to ask the questions without an audience.

Notifications about complex projects must reach all stakeholders — those at the bedside and those who aren’t. For example, discussions with supply chain leaders and materials managers were instrumental in carrying out the project. “Having conversations with the right people at the right time was imperative for success,” Armond said.

Everyone has busy schedules, and sometimes it is assumed that an email communication is enough. But not everyone reads emails timely and some emails become white noise, which means it’s important to use a variety of channels for mass communication in a project as complex as this one, including ongoing conference calls, webinars and system leadership meetings. It’s also important to track who attends these sessions, so that leaders can circle back and work with those that have not attended. In projects like this one, issues can often be attributed to a communication breakdown.

From day one of the project, leaders included key representatives from different service areas at each hospital. This allowed the task force to identify the differences between hospitals and departments, which forced leaders to consider how those differences would affect project implementation, said Page West, R.N., Dignity Health senior vice president and the system’s chief nurse executive. It should be noted that West was the executive sponsor for this project. Having an executive sponsor or leader for systemwide change is imperative for successful adoption.

Local representatives were incredibly reliable in championing the project at their respective facilities because they were individuals who frontline staff already knew and respected for their expertise. “They would go to their hospitals and explain the changes that would occur, while stressing the outcomes that would be made possible because of those changes,” West said. “Staff respected them because they worked with them every day.”

Collaboration, partnership and transparency are critical to drive any project at the system level. “You’ve got to check your ego at the door and be willing to listen to everyone because every single discipline has valuable information to bring forward,” West said. “Unless you’re willing to listen to all that, you won’t get as great of a product at the end.”

Leveraging Data to Engage and Improve

Even when frontline providers help to shape a project, change can be hard. “People are doing what they’re doing because they think it’s the best,” Holdych said. “When you say, ‘let’s think about doing this a different way,’ there’s always that initial, ‘we’re not sure we want to.’”

Regularly sharing performance data and patient feedback with stakeholders helps them to see the impact that change is having on their patients and
Designing for Behavioral Change

As healthcare leaders, we speak about patient compliance: How do we get our patients to do what we want them to do? How do we get them to see the importance? How do we speak their language? This is a major challenge and one of the unique constructs of our profession. This kit was developed and constructed with that ultimate question in mind: How do we get the patients to correctly and fully follow our instructions for the sake of their health?

To accomplish that, Dignity Health and Medline synthesized all of the different instructions being used throughout Dignity Health hospitals, and surveyed each hospital on their infection rates and their satisfaction with current processes.

Here were some of our key best practices in design:

1. The kit had to be “branded” to Dignity Health’s look and feel, following the system’s Hello humankindness™ branding. Why? Because it speaks to the hospital’s relationship with the patient. When the patient recognizes that their health system is delivering everything they need in a manner that is simple and easy, it makes a difference.

2. The language used in the kit instructions had to be conversational English. Healthcare tends to talk in a medical tone, which is technical and often opts for more words than less. A patient under the stress of an upcoming surgery is less likely to be able to absorb this information, let alone comply with its call to action. Our goal wasn’t necessarily to dumb down content, but rather to make it simple and unambiguous. For example, the kit includes two bottles of Chlorhexidine Gluconate (CHG), which are referred to as “special soap,” and “shampoo” that is referred to as a patient’s “regular shampoo”. Some of these clarifications may seem obvious and unnecessary, but they made a broad difference when compliance was tested.

3. Unique tools were included in the kit to help guide the patient through the skin cleansing process. These tools included a waterproof instructional card with clear graphic depictions of each step and simple written instructions, a hand mitt that follows best practices for CHG compatibility and a sand timer to help the patient know how long they need to keep the CHG on their body before rinsing it off.

4. The education booklet summarized the importance of infection prevention in very large print, carefully edited content, and began with a checklist for the patient.

5. The contents were clearly labeled for when they should be used. A bottle of soap and a mitt were labeled for use the night before the surgery, and another set was labeled for the morning of the procedure.

6. The kit had to be compact and easy to store, as many of Dignity Health’s pre-op facilities had limited space.
gets them excited about the project. Frontline staff at Dignity Health were able to receive immediate positive responses from patients who expressed how the skin prep kit helped them feel informed, prepared and engaged in their care. That in-person patient feedback has been reinforced with data compiled from patient comment cards that Medline receives and analyzes. The results are shared with participating hospitals on a quarterly basis.

When project leaders had the option to end the initial distribution of the patient feedback cards, they decided against it. The project has repeatedly been improved based on feedback, and it was important to Dignity Health leaders that it would continue to evolve based on obstacles or concerns that may arise in the future. “We want to hear what patients are saying — the good and the bad,” Armond said. “That’s how we know how the project is progressing and whether our initial decisions still make sense. We also felt this would help support sustainable outcomes.”

While the kit is a tool to reduce SSIs, it’s also an important asset in ensuring a positive patient experience across Dignity Health’s growing health system.

“The feedback that I hear is that patients really feel empowered,” said Paige Greaves, manager of a pre- and post-surgery unit at Dignity Health’s Mercy General Hospital. “The kit allows them to participate in their care and to start the surgical process in their homes. They tell me often that they feel like Dignity Health really cares about them before they even enter our doors.”

Patients also like the kit because, by doing the wash at home, they have a shorter stay in pre-op, Greaves said. Less time in the surgical environment translates into less patient and family anxiety, she added. It also frees up operation rooms for other patients who need them.

Patient opinions about the kit have been overwhelmingly positive, and adoption was widespread. In a survey of almost 7,000 patients, 97 percent agreed or strongly agreed that the prep-kit instructions and the kit itself were easy to use. Ninety-seven percent of respondents also said they understood its importance in reducing their chance of developing an SSI; this statistic shows that patients took ownership for their care and were invested in Dignity Health’s common goal of achieving a positive outcome. Eighty-two percent of patients who received the kit said they completed the skin prep process at home, making their hospital visit more efficient.
Dignity Health’s overall SSI prevention project is just one part of its efforts as a participant in the Hospital Improvement Innovation Network. As part of this Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services initiative, the health system reports its performance on SSI reduction metrics to the federal government and discusses best practices with other participating hospitals.

“We don’t primarily do things because they’re CMS driven or regulatory-driven,” Holdych said. “It’s certainly an impetus, but we’re very focused on doing what’s right for the patient. If you do the right thing for patients based on evidence-based practice, we often find that cost reduction and other benefits will come to fruition as well.”

Listening and Evolving

After the project’s rollout, staff and patient feedback helped to refine processes and the kit itself. The kit initially came in two forms, one in English and one in Spanish, to address language differences. But, in response to feedback, Dignity Health has now transitioned to one kit in both languages. Patients said that the switch would benefit bilingual families, while nurses proposed the change to simplify their workflow and avoid giving patients a kit in the wrong language. This not only created a better experience for patients and staff but also reduced costs for Dignity Health by streamlining inventory and freeing up storage space.

The program gained the respect of caregivers as they saw the impact of their feedback. When clinicians at one hospital suggested a minor wording change to ensure that patients understood their prep-kit bathing instructions, the modification was included in the redesign for the new bilingual kits.

“These clinicians and others felt they were listened to and a part of it, and that changed everything,” Armond said. “Leadership allowed staff members to contribute their thoughts which broke down the barriers we typically see in large health systems.”

Even the most minute details of the kit changed throughout deployment based on patient and staff feedback. For example, a patient focus group provided valuable insight that resulted in a decision to move a patient checklist to the front pages of the booklet to ensure patients saw it.

Other changes were more significant: The question of how to distribute kits at facilities without pre-op clinics was solved by working with Medline to ship those kits to patients’ homes – a deviation impacting about 20 percent of patients that required its own processes and infrastructure.

**Patient Feedback**

- **82%** Completed the skin prep process at home, as intended
- **97%** Agreed or strongly agreed that the prep-kit instructions and the kit itself were easy to use
- **97%** Understood the importance of the kit in reducing their chance of developing an SSI

*According to survey of approximately 7,000 patients*
This allowed Dignity Health to accommodate patients regardless of logistical differences between hospitals, and ultimately improved access by allowing every patient to receive the same pre-operative care. Staff input was critical in improving those processes. When employees reported that it was taking them significant time and resources to determine which patients needed the kits and where they should be shipped, Dignity and Medline worked together to create an automated feature within the health system’s Electronic Medical Record that identifies eligible patients, pulls their addresses from billing records and sends their information to Medline electronically.

“If something impacts workflow and we hear about it, we look for ways to reduce the impact and create efficiencies,” Holdych said. “These improvements not only make our employees’ lives easier, but they also can reduce costs.”

Continuous project improvement is important for success but requires a certain mindset, Dignity Health leaders say. “You can’t ever get so stuck on the idea that you’ve come up with the greatest process that you’re unwilling to change it and tweak it along the way,” West said. “Organizations change, people change and we need to show our patients and staff that we’re committed to adjusting to their unique and ever-changing needs.”

What We Learned

This project’s results demonstrate that systemness can help providers accomplish the Quadruple Aim: better patient outcomes, lower costs, improved staff satisfaction and an improved patient experience. Dignity Health’s leaders say the key to success is keeping the focus on doing what’s good for patients. That emphasis on patient benefits embodies Dignity Health’s Hello humankindness™ promise. “Coming in for surgery is a scary time for patients and their families, and we want to reach out to them ahead of time to help allay any of their anxieties, to connect with them early, to begin to develop that relationship that humans need in order to feel cared about and cared for,” West said.

The project’s reliance on evidence-based practices resulted in the most important outcome for patients — a reduction in surgical site infections. And from that patient benefit of fewer SSIs flows an economic benefit for the health system: the prevention of 43 surgical site infections compared with the health system’s baseline year resulted in a net savings of over $1.2 million. The project has also likely reduced Dignity Health’s labor costs, as nurses no longer need to administer the CHG wash in the hospital for most patients.

The effort required to successfully implement a systemwide project sounds complicated, and it is in many ways. Obstacles are inevitable, but the skin prep project has shown that the key is to expect challenges and to work through them one after the other.

Beyond the science, the meetings, the challenges, and the work that is necessary to overcome them, this project isn’t complicated at its core. “What we’re doing is making it easy for the clinical staff and patients to do what we need them to do. When you think about it that way, it’s very simple and very impactful,” Armond said.

By the Numbers

- Over 68,000 kits ordered since August 2016
- 80% Shipped to provider
- 20% Shipped to patient home
- 43 SSIs avoided across health system
- $1.2 million in net savings
- 92% of Dignity hospitals have implemented the program
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.

About Dignity Health

Excellent, affordable health care, delivered with compassion, is what we stand for. Since our founding in 1986, we’ve made it our goal to create environments that meet each patient’s physical, mental, and spiritual needs. We also believe this healing philosophy promotes the wellbeing of our staff and the places they serve. Dignity Health is made up of more than 60,000 caregivers and staff who deliver excellent care to diverse communities in 21 states. Headquartered in San Francisco, Dignity Health is the fifth largest health system in the nation and the largest hospital provider in California. Through teamwork and innovation, faith and compassion, advocacy and action, we endeavor every day to keep you happy, healthy, and whole.

About Modern Healthcare Custom Media

Modern Healthcare Custom Media’s dedicated team of writers and researchers develops custom content solutions designed to educate and engage readers. These custom content solutions provide in-depth information on a specific trend, topic or solution that is top-of-mind for healthcare executives.