Patient demand will ensure technology adoption

By MICHAEL MCBRIDE, Technology Editor

A month after the presidential election, columnists, pundits, and news sources continue to post their takes on the future of the Affordable Care Act (ACA). Many great minds have posited on where we’ll be going from here. Most believe that the country won’t be turning away from reform and that the transformation of healthcare from paper to electronics will move forward.

We won’t be returning to the time when physicians scratched out their lab tests and prescription orders on paper scripts, nor to a time when pharmacists hoped they interpreted doctors’ scrawls correctly and accurately dispensed the proper medications to patients.

Had healthcare earnestly followed that lead in the 1990s, the field would be past the “pain” and on to the “gain” of an electronic healthcare system today. But I digress. We’ve come too far, and there’s no going back.

No matter how much you may complain about having to adopt certain technology, there’s no getting around the fact that more and more patients are choosing practices with electronic health record (EHR) systems. In these practices, online portals may enable patients to schedule appointments and communicate with their care providers. Patients may be able to preemptively elect doctors who will automatically have access to their families’ medical records in the event that a patient is incapacitated and cannot grant permission. Such records can follow patients wherever they go and update automatically from any point at which a patient is receiving treatment.

Patients now know that the tools for these advancements exist, and they want their physicians to use them—or they’ll go to those who do. They are tired of completing redundant forms. They know about practices that hand out iPads in the waiting room for registration and history updates. They know about practices that hand over families’ medical records in the event that a patient is incapacitated and cannot grant permission. Such records can follow patients wherever they go and update automatically from any point at which a patient is receiving treatment.

Despite all the rhetoric about the future of healthcare and the government’s role in its delivery, another force will accelerate the adoption of healthcare information technology: consumer demand.

Healthcare consumers now anticipate a day when they will be able to schedule doctors’ visits and review their medication histories online as easily as they order airline tickets and view itineraries. And there’s really no reason that this can’t happen. The travel, banking, and retail industries—acquiescing to customer demand—made the transition to electronic online business decades ago against the same wave of skepticism. Look where they are today.

The opportunity to capture as many patients who are seeking EHR-based practices is now. It’s growing, but it won’t be around forever.

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