



Session Summary: Financial Counseling & Education

Session Leaders:



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In October 2022, the healthXchange Patient Financial Services online meeting included a lively discussion focused on financial counseling and education. Led by Jennifer Dyrseth, the Financial Services Manager at Olympic Medical Center, and Christopher Ritscher, the Manager, Patient Access, Financial Clearance at OSF Healthcare, the discussion ranged across six broad issues:

- Scope of Financial Counseling Provided
 - On the front-end
 - On the back-end
 - In the Emergency Department
- Translating Medical Bills to Improve Understanding
- Education & Community Outreach Programming
- Building a High Performing Counseling Team

Read on for a full summary of this enlightening discussion, featuring comments, questions, and feedback from the panelists as well as audience members.

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On the front end

A first step in financial counseling is truly ensuring a full picture of coverage and eligibility is determined – which in some cases, particularly in the ED, can be quite complex, as patients may be either unable, or unwilling to provide detailed information to registration teams. Creating a strong bond with patients to gather information to support eligibility and to identify where support may be available is an essential first step.

For scheduled procedures and care, financial counseling teams are looking to create not only an accurate picture of benefits, but also an accurate estimate through working with patients and providers to gather all details of the available coverage as well as the treatment plan. Working with payers is increasingly challenging, particularly in addressing exclusions. A number of individuals during the session noted the difficulties of addressing exclusions, and shared examples of situations where procedures had been pre-authorized but then denied on the back-end due to an exclusion, creating an incredibly difficult situation for both patients and hospitals.

Ultimately, financial counseling teams are looking to ensure an accurate picture of coverage, to ensure authorization has been successfully and correctly obtained, and that financial responsibilities of the patient whether self-pay, co-pay or co-insurance, have been explained.

Changing Scope of Financial Counseling being Provided

Price transparency, in addition to federal and state legislation including the No Surprises Act, have catapulted discussions surrounding the cost of healthcare into the mainstream, and as a result, financial counseling teams must adapt to new conversations, and have robust processes in place to support patient finance. A role that at one time focused more on the back end, providing counseling to support patients with bills that required payment plans or collection agencies, has turned into a holistic conversation surrounding eligibility, the cost of care, and payment responsibilities. As one individual noted, the No Surprises Act has truly highlighted the deficiencies of only looking at financial counseling from a retrospective, back-end view.

On the back end

Once final bills have been generated, financial counseling teams are working with patients to not only explain the bills, but to also address issues including under or over estimates, issues surrounding policy exclusions, as well as changes to estimates caused by benefits or health plan changes.

Overall, the audience agreed that there has been a tremendous shift from a focus on the back-end of patient finance to a more front-end, holistic approach, ensuring patients are able to make an informed decision about their care, not only medically, but also financially.

In the Emergency Department

An additional area of concern for the audience was providing financial counseling in the Emergency Department, which appears to have been curtailed in some organizations during the acute phase of the COVID-19 pandemic. One individual noted that having financial counselors in the ED has also led to conversations surrounding the use of the ED in cases that could have been addressed in a different care setting, such as at an Urgent Care facility or even at a General Practitioners office. Ultimately, more than 75% of the audience supported having financial counselors in the emergency department available, and in cases where a representative could not be supported, having detailed information to provide to patients on how to contact financial counselors was advised.

Translating Medical Bills to Improve Understanding

In order to help patients understand the bills that they have been provided, financial counselors are taking the time to explain in detail the various charges, in many cases, on a line-by-line basis. Panelists noted that for many patients and caregivers, this might be the first time that they are going through a medical crisis, and that understanding coverage and bills is a complex affair, even for seasoned executives that have a strong grasp on co-payment vs. co-insurance, and understand what contractual adjustment represents.

One individual noted that their approach has been to liken medical bills to other types of bills, such as a utility bill, to create a level of understanding with patients and families.

Ultimately, the audience agreed that financial counselors play a crucial role in assuring patients understand their responsibilities, and that they are supported by the hospital through teams explaining the details and making sure that any questions are addressed.



Education & Community Outreach Programs

The implementation of the Affordable Care Act nearly a decade ago created new opportunities for hospitals to connect with patients and support individuals that could secure coverage through the new legislation. Participants shared a number of ways that they supported their communities in providing education regarding enrollment, including:

- State / community fairs
- In Schools & Libraries
- Habitat for Humanity
- FQHC Partnerships
- School-based Health Centers
- Local Non-Profit Partnerships

The focus of many of these partnerships has been to increase health literacy and enrollment, through providing guidance and education to local communities on the availability of insurance, potential subsidies, as well as government support that may be available.

As legislation continues to evolve, and a potential dismantling of the Affordable Care Act continues to loom on the horizon, hospitals must also consider how they can stay on top of both state and federal legislation impacting access.

Developing High Performing Financial Counseling Teams

Throughout the healthcare industry, securing and retaining high performing talent is a continued challenge, especially as salaries in healthcare have to some extent not matched the pace with the offers being provided in other industries such as hospitality and retail.

Recruitment

To build a strong financial counseling team, many leaders are taking an approach that skills are trainable, while personality is inherent, meaning that the personality of the potential new hire outweighs their experience in healthcare or other relevant industries, though this is of course the preference. Identifying individuals that can balance business sense alongside empathy, and understand that difficult conversations will have to be had, is essential.

Many examples were shared during the session of how to identify the appropriate candidates, and to vet their personal characteristics, soft-skills, as well as relevant business skills. With many people putting their best foot forward during interview processes, taking an approach of making candidates comfortable and creating an openness during the interview was shared, as well as using personality or strength skills assessments.

Training

As new team members are introduced, having a structured and comprehensive training program in place ensures a rapid assimilation into the team, and having dedicated individuals responsible for training is often helpful, rather than training of new hires being conducted by management. Many teams are using Epic and thus take advantage of training courses available through the platform, with additional training provided through partnership with the HFMA.

A number of individuals mentioned the need and importance of training on the full revenue cycle, so that financial counselors can understand the downstream ramifications of their role. While training on the job and the front-end processes is most important, it is also relevant for individuals to have an understanding of concepts such as cash posting, health information management, etc., so that there is a comprehension of how registration activities impact the revenue cycle further down the line.

The difficulty in training in a remote environment was also discussed; whether employees are 100% remote, a mix of in-office and remote, or perhaps working at disparate facilities with geographic distance, much training is now conducted in a virtual environment. When addressing the challenge of training and retaining remote staff, the audience agreed that creating stronger bonds through using face-to-face video interaction was essential.



Conclusion

As we concluded the session, the panelists were asked to share what concerns were keeping them up at night, and we had several insightful replies:

- Ensuring compliance with No Surprises Act and future legislative developments
- Hiring and staffing – how to compete and succeed in a tight labor market
- Unanticipated payer exclusions – particularly impacting high dollar procedures