
Improving imaging experience through patient-centred communication



Direct communication between radiologist and patient is an area which has long been a deficiency for the field of radiology. There have been a number of barriers to effective radiologist patient communication including logistical challenges, a negative impact on efficiency, and uncertainty of the role of the radiologist in discussing results with patients, says a review article published online in the journal *Current Problems in Diagnostic Radiology*.

"Historically, the radiologist has relied upon their printed report as the primary medium of communication and care delivery. Informal in-person or telephone consultations with referring physicians have supplemented the communication process in specific instances. In general, however, there has been very little meaningful communication between radiologist and patient directly," write authors Arvind Vijayasarithi, MD, MBA, MPH; Noriko Salamon, MD PhD (both with UCLA Department of Radiology, Neuroradiology Section); and Renuka Kharkar, MD (Carl T Hayden, Veterans Affairs Medical Center, Department of Psychiatry).

Today, patient consumerism is on the rise, as patients are often now paying the first dollar for healthcare services given the proliferation of high deductible health plans/health savings. With patients taking increasingly active roles in their own healthcare, it is imperative for radiologists to adopt a patient-centred approach to their practice. "This means that radiologists should consider the patient experience holistically, and look for opportunities to exceed patient expectations at each step along the way," according to the authors.

They emphasise that radiologist-patient communication is paramount to the patient-centred imaging experience.

"Communication is more complex than simply transmitting a report to the referring physician. It is multidirectional with many opportunities for the radiologist to meaningfully interact with the patient, referring provider and general public," the authors explain.

Previous studies have demonstrated that patients indicate a preference to be able to communicate directly with imaging experts. While there are a variety of modes of communication that could take place between patient and radiologist, perhaps the most logistically feasible mechanisms take place via digital platforms, according to the authors. "The ability of practices to strategically harness these available resources will dictate in part the success or failure of Radiology's transition to patient-centred imaging."

There are a variety of platforms through which radiologists can reach patients directly. Practice website and social media accounts may be initial point of contact and significantly impact a patient's first impression, the authors say. Through these online platforms, a practice can demonstrate value to specific groups of patients by "interacting directly" with patient advocacy forums/groups to clarify misconceptions and potentially reach patients who could benefit from diagnostic or interventional services. Patients also have the opportunity to share their experiences with each other and ask/answer questions related to topics of common interest.

As more patients now prefer access to their imaging and reports via online patient portals, efforts should be made to improve the patient-centredness of radiology reporting.

"Radiology reports have traditionally been geared towards a highly sophisticated medical audience of referring providers and other radiologists. The routine addition of a brief patient-focused summary may be an important supplemental element of radiology reporting in the patient portal era," the authors point out.

Virtual consultation with patients and providers is feasible via existing technology, can be a viable mechanism for the radiologist to strengthen radiologist-patient communication, and can serve to better integrate radiology into clinical practice, according to the authors.

It's important for radiology groups to develop a comprehensive patient-centred strategy for augmenting direct radiologist-patient communication through a variety of mechanisms that leverage existing and emerging IT solutions, the authors conclude.

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