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Radiology Cares™ Campaign Combats ‘Invisibility’ Factor

By encouraging meaningful physician engagement in the patient experience, the Radiological Society of North America (RSNA)’s new Radiology Cares™ campaign offers an effective solution to a common problem radiologists often face: invisibility.

“Even though we actively participate in patient care, we’re relatively invisible to the eye of the patient,” said William T. Thorwarth Jr., M.D., a radiologist/ partner at Catawba Radiological Associates in Hickory, N.C., and RSNA Board Liaison for Publications and Communications. “We need to be seen as we actually are: active participants in patient care.”

At RSNA 2012, RSNA launched the “Radiology Cares: The Art of Patient- Centered Practice” campaign—an initiative linked with the annual meeting’s patient-centered theme—challenging radiologists to play a more visible and active role.

To aid that effort, RSNA has put together a library of online tools at RadiologyCares.org. Online resources include PowerPoint presentations that can be customised for specific audiences and patient-centered care literature from scientific journals, medical trade publications and mainstream consumer media. (see sidebar, p.29)

Central to the campaign is the Radiology Cares pledge encouraging radiologists and other imaging professionals to commit to more meaningful engagement in the patient experience, with the goal of helping patients make better informed decisions regarding their healthcare. Those taking the pledge at RadiologyCares.org receive campaign updates and new materials as they are developed.

“This campaign is an outgrowth of the efforts of the RSNA Public Information Committee (PIC), which has made great strides in increasing public awareness about modern imaging technologies,” said Mary C. Mahoney, M.D., director of breast imaging at the University of Cincinnati Medical Center’s Barrett Cancer Center and chair of RSNA’s Patient-centered Radiology Steering Committee. “However, research has shown that many consumers are unaware of the role radiologists play in their healthcare.”

In addition, various market forces— from the growth of teleradiology and non-radiologists performing imaging exams to changing reimbursement models and healthcare reform— present both a threat and an opportunity within the specialty. As a result, experts say it is more critical than ever for radiologists to prioritise patient satisfaction and strengthen relationships with referring physicians, hospital administrators and insurers.

“The whole field will lose credibility and respect over time if all we do is read images and are not engaged in the process,” Dr. Mahoney said. “We need to bring more to the table or we’ll become less relevant to clinicians and patients.”

Self-Assessment Critical to Patient-Centered Practice

To become more patient-centered, Dr. Thorwarth suggests that radiology practices conduct self-assessments addressing the entire continuum of care. “We need to be continually asking, ‘What are we doing well? Where do we need to improve?’” he said. “Every radiologist knows the value of making the patient experience more positive, from convenient parking to a comfortable waiting area to easy and timely access to results.”

While the Radiology Cares campaign suggests increasing face-to-face interaction, Dr. Mahoney said talking to patients and sharing results is just one small piece of the overall patient experience. Specific initiatives undertaken to improve that experience—and keep up with the pace of change—will vary from practice to practice.

“There’s no such thing as being perfectly centered on the patient,” said Brent J. Wagner, M.D., president of West Reading Radiology Associates in Reading, Pa. “The fact that you are moving in the right direction is what really counts.”

When it comes to talking to patients, Dr. Wagner advises radiologists to look for opportunities for interaction and then strive to get the most out of each exchange. “If we interact with just two or three patients a day, there’s no reason we can’t bring an emotional energy and investment to each of those interactions,” he said.

For example, Dr. Wagner said he takes the opportunity to meet with the parents of children who have had normal ultrasound exams, patients who've undergone biopsies and those asking to speak with a radiologist.

Educate Patients, Ask for Feedback

Empathy for patients manoeuvring through the healthcare system prompted Jennifer L. Kemp, M.D., and her colleagues to develop communication tools for their patients at Rose Medical Center in Denver, where she serves as chair of the Radiology Department. Those resources include patient education videos, a follow-up postcard and thank-you letters that solicit feedback.

"I wanted to include information on radiologist training in these pieces because I think even my friends and family don't have a clue as to what I do," said Dr. Kemp, also a private practice radiologist with Diversified Radiology, a large Denver-based radiology group, and a member of RSNA's Patient-Centered Radiology Steering Committee. "In our current healthcare environment, people need to know the value we offer."

The postcard they give to patients directly addresses the invisibility issue and emphasises quality: "While you might not have seen us, we know you are here; we know your physicians and what they are looking for. We work hard to assure that you are having the best and safest test to address your symptoms."

To improve accessibility to referring physicians, Dr. Kemp and colleagues list their direct phone number at the bottom of reports—a change she says has had a profound effect on both physician relationships and her work life.

"Referring physicians call constantly now," she said. "They want to talk about appropriate follow up or ask for a second opinion. As a result, I find my work much more rewarding; I feel more connected with the patients. And it helps me to be a better radiologist."

Despite the interruptions, Dr. Kemp said the volume of exams read by the six radiologists at her hospital is among the highest in her 50-radiologist group. "I'd rather be part of a team caring for patients than just someone turning out a report," she said. "I strongly believe that I'm building a trust among referring physicians and patients because they know their exams are being read by a radiologist who cares."

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