**Patient Portal: A Magic Gateway to Healthcare Reform**

by Robert A. Duke

Some famous portals include Alice’s rabbit hole to wonderland, the Chronicles of Narnia’s wardrobe, and Star Trek’s many black holes. A patient’s portal is an online door or window into your electronic medical records (EMR). It is where you can look at your medical records and see the same records your doctor sees on a computer screen — a bit of electronic magic. It is also a direct internet link between you and your doctor or healthcare team from anywhere in the world. You can send and receive messages and consult about care and treatment all online.

The magic of health portals empowers the rise of more e-patients (but not always better) relationships, and different research: better health information technology (IT) adoption programs funded by the US government is that health IT is a key enabler to the cost curve. The focus for the past several years has been on helping providers migrate from paper to electronic health records. This year (2014), the focus has shifted from Meaningful Use Phase One to the next level of requirements in Phase Two. In this second phase, providers are being asked not just to document the care they give in an electronic health record but also to begin sharing information with others. In 1993, Ferguson organized the world’s first conference devoted to computer systems designed for medical consumers. He had a prolific career in consumer-focused medical writing as founder of Medical Self Care magazine.

Ferguson coined the term to describe individuals who are “equipped, enabled, empowered and engaged” in their own health and care decisions. According to Wikipedia An e-patient is a health consumer who participates fully in his/her own medical care. Sometimes referred to as an “internet patient,” e-patients see themselves as equal partners with their doctors in the healthcare process. The term encompasses both those who seek guidance for their own ailments and the friends and family members (e-caregivers) who go online on their behalf. E-patients report two effects of their health research: better health information and services, and different (but not always better) relationships with their doctors. The “e” can stand for electronic (but not always better) relationships, and different.

The premise of the health information technology (IT) adoption programs funded by the US government is that health IT is a key enabler to the cost curve. The focus for the past several years has been on helping providers migrate from paper to electronic health records. This year (2014), the focus has shifted from Meaningful Use Phase One to the next level of requirements in Phase Two. In this second phase, providers are being asked not just to document the care they give in an electronic health record but also to begin sharing information with others. In the first instance, the sharing has been between providers to ensure proper handoffs in the care delivery process, for example, between...
PeaceHealth’s PatientConnection portal is an EMR IT product called MyChart from Epic Systems Corporation, a privately held healthcare software company headquartered in Verona, Wisconsin. Epic makes software for mid-size and large medical groups, hospitals and integrated healthcare organizations.

Little information is available about PatientConnection at PeaceHealth in Whatcom County because, according to Amy Cloud, St. Public Relations and Marketing Coordinator for St. Joseph Medical Center, no local support is available for PatientConnection in Whatcom County. All support and management for PatientConnection is based at PeaceHealth in Vancouver, Washington. Cloud was unable to arrange an interview from officials in Whatcom County. In this article, we will comparison to FCN’s InTouch portal from a patient’s perspective. Readers take note that content or development. I don’t believe we will appear there when fully implemented. Missing are: My Online Forms, My Agreement, Clinical Documents and Medical Documents. Empty tabs give the impression that my portal might be missing information, but I have no way of knowing. Other patients viewing my portal with a similar profile would rather these tabs were eliminated.

FCN’s Brian Ecker does not know what might appear in these tabs and, therefore, it might be missing. “FCN’s portal software is a shared product (used by others) and FCN has no control over its content or development. I don’t believe we will use these tabs at all,” Ecker said.

When I asked about Payment History under the Billing tab, he explained that the way InTouch is set up, the portal can only provide a history of payments made through the portal. Payments by any other means are not viewable. During our interview, I told him that, as a patient, I wanted to add items to my portal, in particular my HIPAA release form, Physician Order for Life Sustaining Treatment (POLST) form and healthcare directive to be available on my portal. Eckner again cited the fact that the portal software is shared and not under FCN’s control. He explained, he said, “is a staged process and timing of changes and improvements is out of FCN’s hands.”

PatientConnection is set for full implementation. It is not fully functional. Some tabs are blank and there is no description of what will appear there when fully implemented. Missing are: My Online Forms, My Agreement, Clinical Documents and Medical Documents. Empty tabs give the impression that my portal might be missing information, but I have no way of knowing. Other patients viewing my portal with a similar profile would rather these tabs were eliminated.

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“Presently, patient changes or additions must be submitted to FCN, through the portal or in person, to be posted to the portal,” he said.

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PeaceHealth’s portal is PatientConnection, which is a private communication method that allows patients to access their electronic medical records from any computer with internet capability. This portal is simple to use and has quickly become a popular tool among patients. It is a private and secure way to view medical records, request appointments, and communicate with providers.

The Appointment Details page is dense with information and graphs. It consists of four columns of text data and 19 rows of text and numerical information. Much of the information is general content, formatting, which makes finding and reading the pertinent information (the results of the appointment) difficult. My patient guide commented that so much data displayed, he/she felt obligated to scan the document to avoid overlooking new information.

It wasn’t obvious how fully developed and implemented the PatientConnection portal is, but given the phased development of portals through Stages 1 and 2, and that Stage 2 is just beginning (see CMS information above), it is unlikely that PatientConnection has achieved its ultimate form.

Particular interest was the availability of analytic tools for manipulating the weight of data supplied by the portal. PeaceHealth patients can use their portals to examine test data and lab results according to their own criteria by changing the scale of graphs, expanding or contracting time frames and comparing measurements against different standards.

Patients can ask and answer their own questions. They can mine their data for more information than standard test results offer.

We agreed that these are not for every patient, but for those who wish to be fully informed and involved in their care and treatment, the portal is a breakthrough in creating the e-patient.

Peace Arch Hosts Climate Change Rally

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The rally was created in solidarity with the massive People’s Climate March in New York City on Sunday, which drew 400,000 people, and was part of the Four Days of Action campaign aimed at protecting the Salish Sea. This campaign, organized and led by the Nawtsamaat Alliance, which plans to mobilize local citizens to help stop the large increase in fossil fuel projects in the Pacific Northwest and increase awareness of the risks and threats to the Salish Sea. Among them are the proposed Kinder Morgan Trans Mountain Pipeline expansion in British Columbia, the proposed export expansion at Cherry Point, the rising number of oil trains, coal trains and tankers, said Jared Howe, an organizer for 350 Seattle.

In the Pacific Northwest, there are currently active proposals for five new coal terminals, three new oil pipelines, as well as six new natural gas pipelines. Together, these projects are capable of shipping an enormous amount of fossil fuels, which when burned would release 761 million metric tons of carbon dioxide into the atmosphere each year. This would be twelve times the amount of carbon dioxide emissions that Canada as a country currently emits each year, or 76 coal-fired power plants.

The occasion also marked the official launch of the Pledge to save the Salish Sea, a campaign that calls on legislators to act at critical moments to stop key projects and push for climate leadership in the region, organize cross-border delegations to speak to politicians and other decision makers and help organize future rallies.

Participants ended the rally in a ceremony of commitment to protect the Salish Sea by joining hands across the border.

“I think there needs to be something done,” Mt. Cipriano said.

“I am concerned for my daughter, so I’m marching for her. When she’s grown, I want to be able to tell her I did something about it.”

The event was co-sponsored by 350 Bellingham, the Nawtsamaat Alliance, Washington Environmental Council, Backbone Campaign, PIPE UP Network, Sierra Club BC, LeadNow, Climate Solutions, Faith Action Network, Friends of the Earth, Sierra Club and Greenpeace.