Three ways healthcare facilities are rebounding from COVID-19

By Lisa Grabl
August 4, 2020

Leaders from several organizations explain how they're meeting the needs of their patients and employees.

The impacts of COVID-19 on healthcare have been far reaching with no immediate end in sight. The stresses this pandemic have put on medicine, however, haven't changed the medical needs of millions of Americans. As elective care starts to return, we spoke with several organizations around the country to see how they're meeting the needs of their patients and employees.

Telehealth is becoming a legitimate tool

The rise of telehealth is an unexpected benefit from the crisis and many facilities have shifted from no virtual appointments to making it a regular part of their practice. One unique use of telehealth came from Tim Putnam, CEO and president of Margaret Mary Health in Batesville, Indiana. They had an existing telehealth relationship with their school system so doctors could

see students with the help of technology and school nurses. When schools shut down due to Covid-19, they were able to utilize that technology to create a temporary respiratory clinic.

"In a rural area it's tough because internet capabilities are really poor in many of our areas. But we're thinking right now about remote sites," said Putnam. "So, if I've got a medical assistant and a great internet connection, can a patient visit there instead of going to their primary care physician? I mean, other than the physician not being physically there, my technician or my medical assistant's there who can draw blood, get vital signs, position the camera appropriately to get an image of an ear or throat or something else. There's a lot of stuff where we met flat resistance beforehand, now we know it works, so how do we optimize it?"

Gary Roth, DO, chief medical officer for the Michigan Hospital and Health Association and a board-certified cardiothoracic surgeon, found that his physician colleagues were quick to embrace telehealth and that most are looking at ways to further embrace it. One of the groups within the association went from 100 virtual patient visits a day before the pandemic to as many as 2,000 visits a day after.

Byron Wade vice president of UPMC Presbyterian in Pittsburgh, shared the unique way they're using telehealth, in which they "offer telehealth critical care services to New York Presbyterian, along with other hospitals inside of our system. I think that's going to be another way that [the industry] sees telehealth grow—not just yourself and not just outpatient, but how can you help others."

Regaining public trust

One of the biggest issues with starting elective procedures is letting patients know that it's safe for them to come back to the hospital or clinic. Austin Gillard, CEO of Clay County Medical Center in Kansas said:

"I believe patients and consumers are going to be cautious to step into a hospital. It's already unsettling for them, so I think perception is really going to hinder the things we do in healthcare during this pandemic."

To help regain patient confidence, they've been posting on Facebook and other social media outlets outlining what patients can expect when they come in. They're also providing patients with masks if they need them.

Dr. Roth found that while his facilities were ready to ramp back up, patients weren't ready to return. The association started a series of public service announcements with local media outlets to reinforce that it's safe to come back and to not put off needed care. Communication has been key in building patient confidence and getting them to return, Roth said.

Better employee engagement

With layoffs, furloughs, and a pandemic, this is as stressful a time for healthcare workers as it is for patients. Maintaining clear communication with employees is key—keeping them updated on

what is going on will help to calm fears. Creating more flexibility during this time is also important to keep your employees engaged.

At CompHealth, we found we needed to communicate more often than we were used to. The CEO of our parent company implemented weekly video chats with the entire company as well as sending out regular messages about the status of our business and working from home.

Whether you're meeting in person or virtually, it's important to create avenues to both share information and receive feedback from employees.

Healthcare facilities are implementing similar efforts. Austin Gillard said. "I feel like I've increased my daily presence through department rounding dramatically. I'm out on the floor more seeing how everyone's doing, just for their mental health, because I feel like it's not only challenging for them at work, but their lives have changed. When I talk with our team members, everyone tries to seem happy. A lot of them aren't used to having their kids home as school has moved online, so they've had to adjust their own lives."

Whether you're meeting in person or virtually, it's important to create avenues to both share information and receive feedback from employees. Surveys or anonymous comment forms on your intranet are another way to keep the pulse of your employees and learn how they're handling the pandemic, their work, and their personal lives. Listening and implementing changes based on what you're hearing will help keep your employees engaged in their work while staying focused on your patients.

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