

## Partnering with our patients

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What health care professional doesn't believe in patient-centered care? The term alone resonates with all of us, whether working in a hospital, clinic, or other health facility, with patients as the foci of our attention. Yet when the various definitions of "patient-centered care" are examined carefully, and our own practice patterns are compared to these standards, many of us come up short. Our professional training, traditional culture, and the systems in which we work create an environment that is often, in truth, more health care professional-centric. Moving the current health system into a patient-centered model is a cultural transformation that requires all of us to adopt a new perspective.

The Institute of Medicine described 6 goals for the 21st century health care system, including patient-centered care.<sup>1</sup> Many of the leaders in health care—Institute of Medicine, National Quality Forum, The Joint Commission, Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality and the World Health Organization—have defined patient-centered care. Though the specifics of these descriptions vary, each of them contains similar key

concepts. One of the most important components of patient-centered care is *patient empowerment*.

This concept has been described in a variety of ways: involving patients (and their families), partnering with patients, patient engagement, patient self-management, shared decision-making. The key principle in this term is the role of the patient as an active member of the health care team, engaged as a contributing constituent in the process of addressing his or her own health care needs. This collaborative relationship requires both the professional and the patient to be actively engaged throughout the continuum of the health care encounter.

Two models of care—the chronic care model and shared decision-making—provide evidence-based approaches around which health care professionals can design their practices.<sup>2,3</sup> These models move away from the traditional paternalistic relationship between professional and patient, to a collaborative approach that includes sharing information with each other, participation by both the patient and professional in decision-making, and patient self-management that is supported by the health care professional.

Partnering with patients requires training of both health care professionals and patients in the core components involved. Patients alone cannot become "empowered." Both professionals and patients need training and education in effective communication (including "speaking up,"

active listening, and crucial conversations) and shared decision-making. Tools and materials need to be available to facilitate patient self-management, such as personal medication lists and home monitoring. And health care professionals need to support and encourage this collaborative approach. Patient engagement is not about shifting responsibility from the professional to the patient. Currently available educational materials and "safety tips" may not be understood by patients nor well-received by professionals (ie, patients asking their doctor to wash their hands).<sup>4</sup> Roles and responsibilities for both the patient and health care professional need to be clearly defined, with mutual understanding and agreement.

Evidence supports that patient-centered care can improve our health care system. First, patients, as well as the professionals, are more satisfied in a patient-centered environment.<sup>5,6</sup> Efficiency and effectiveness of care may improve by reducing overuse and underuse of indicated medical services currently found in our system today.<sup>6</sup> Engaged patients have better clinical outcomes; chronic conditions are improved through self-management tools, patients adhere successfully to their medication regimens, rates of subsequent re-hospitalizations are reduced.<sup>5,7</sup> Numerous studies have also shown that patients who have good communication, positive relationships, and feel valued by their health care professional (all components of patient-centered care) are less likely

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to sue their physicians.<sup>8</sup> If higher quality and safer care is our goal, then patient-centered care is an effective strategy to get there.

Aurora Health Care has begun this transformation into a patient-centered system of care. Since 2001, Aurora has been incorporating the Planetree model into every aspect of the organization. Planetree, a national leader in patient-centered care, is a care model that enables patients to be active participants in their health care.<sup>9</sup> Aurora has used the Planetree approach in their re-design of both inpatient and outpatient systems, for training of clinical and non-clinical staff, and when building new facilities to assure an environment that supports patient-centered care. Aurora physicians, staff, and programs have been recognized nationally for their efforts to bring the elements of patient-centered care to their patients.

In our efforts to define patient empowerment, Aurora recently completed a project on improving medication safety in the outpatient setting through a collaborative approach. Using an expanded definition of patient involvement, patients were asked to participate with professionals at the organizational level, helping plan, develop, and implement the project.<sup>5,6</sup> In 2005, with the support of an Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality grant, patients and professionals from 5 Aurora clinics and 4 retail pharmacies in Walworth County, Wis created the Walworth County Patient Safety Council (Council). This advisory council was established as a means of literally bringing the patients' voice to the table. Patients and professionals worked together to address the problem of creating an accurate medication list—for both patients and health

care professionals. The Council members quickly realized there were issues that both patients and professionals needed to address: education about medication safety, training regarding effective communication, self-management tools for patients, and modifications to the workflow in the clinics. Over a 2-year period, the Council identified the problems, found strategies for improvement, created tools and resources, and disseminated them throughout the community in a grassroots effort. When they measured the impact of their efforts in 2007, the Council found that they had improved the accuracy of the medication list in the clinics by 17%.<sup>10</sup> The Walworth County Board of Supervisors acknowledged the impact of this local effort with a Certificate of Accomplishment. The greater health care community recognized the power of this collaborative to improve patient safety with the Institute for Safe Medication Practices 2007 Cheers Award.<sup>11</sup>

Patient empowerment is a powerful tool that, when done correctly, can have significant impact on the patient, the professional, and the entire health care system. However, few of us in health care have been trained, have the appropriate tools to share with our patients, or work in systems that support a patient-centered care model. When these resources are applied, and patients and professionals collaborate at all levels of the care process—from point of service, to the organizational level, and out into the community—we all benefit. Aurora Health Care has begun the journey toward partnering with our patients. Though we have far to go, we have already identified the most important lesson: Listen to our patients.

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