



The Patient Experience: How to Plan for Success

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There are several methods that can be used to gain a better perspective when determining the success of an oncology practice and its operations. Financial evaluation, access to care, quality metrics, and employee engagement are just a few of the operational elements that are important to consider, especially as they relate to the overall patient experience.

We are all familiar with the ever-changing landscape of healthcare, especially in oncology. This is evident not only in terms of evolving technologies and therapies, but in how the patient experience is perceived and measured. To remain competitive and ensure that patient expectations are being met, practice leaders are faced with the task of providing an experience that is preferential and unique within the markets they serve. In this article, we will discuss some of the strategies that can be used to provide patients with these types of positive experiences.

SET THE STANDARD

When looking to implement or change a patient experience program, it is important to define what an exceptional experience would look and feel like and understand what the present-day experience is for patients. The most valuable tool for understanding present-day patient experiences is the patient survey, which is often underutilized. When practices do use these surveys, they

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tend to focus on overall composite scores instead of the comments. However, it is important to take the time to read all of the comments, because these can serve as a barometer for trends that may be occurring. An example might be a sudden uptick in unfavorable comments regarding message handling. Was there a

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recent change made that could be negatively affecting another area of practice operations? Tracking both the comments and composite scores can be valuable for understanding whether there are new issues arising that need to be addressed.

Once you have gathered information regarding the present-day patient experience, you can work with your team to implement a program that will help take that experience to a higher level. Setting the standard with your team and reevaluating this standard when variances are noted is key to ensuring that improvements in your patient experience program are being made on a regular basis.

VIEW YOUR PRACTICE THROUGH THE PATIENT'S EYES

As already discussed, understanding what your patients experience is paramount to the successful planning of a better patient experience. Along with your staff, take the time to see, hear, and feel what patients encounter when visiting your practice. Sit in the lobby, spend time in examination rooms, and call the front desk to determine where improvements need to be made to the physical environment and/or staff training.

The process of observing and feeling what your patients are experiencing can begin outside your building. Recently, an employee at a medical practice in our region who was participating in the development of a patient experience program, noticed that there was inadequate signage in the parking lot. The patients were confused as to which way they were supposed to go since the practice was located in a large complex with multiple specialties. As a result of this employee's observation, improvements were made to the signage, and both staff and patients voiced their appreciation for the change.

SOLICIT FEEDBACK AND SHARE IT WITH YOUR TEAM

Perhaps the most important aspect of ensuring your program is effective is requesting feedback from your patients. Continue to monitor patient surveys and look for what is working and what needs tweaking; this is paramount to the continued success of the patient experience program. In addition to surveys, it is equally (if not more) important to speak to your patients directly to better understand

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their thoughts on improvements and their impressions of the visit. Not only does this provide valuable feedback but the act itself has led to improved patient scores and statistically significant data when considering survey size. Simply put, talk to your patients, listen to what they have to say, and do something with the information you have been given.

PROCESSES TO MAKE PROGRESS

There are many processes available to assist practice leaders in making meaningful changes to workflow, communication, or programming that can improve the patient experience. Design thinking, which we discussed in the March 2021 issue of *Oncology Practice Management* (www.oncpracticemanagement.com/issues/2021/march-2021-vol-11-no-3/2221-empathy-and-an-open-mind-design-thinking-in-healthcare), the Kaizen process, and other easily implemented, reversible, low-cost efforts can be helpful in assisting your team through the process.

HAVE THE RIGHT PEOPLE ON YOUR TEAM

To take a note from the author Jim Collins in his book *Good to Great*, getting the right people on the

bus and the wrong ones off will be crucial for effective transformation. Speaking from personal experience, those who do not promote the vision for your practice need to either get on board or consider departing. One effective method for gaining the sup-

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port of team members who are disengaged is to include them in the process and figure out why they are not on board. Listen to their concerns, perhaps appoint them as leads for a particular aspect of implementation, or have them drive the team to help overcome barriers that may have caused previous efforts to fail. This type of engagement has the potential to not only turn team members around but to improve engagement across your entire team, since these individuals are often the most vocal and tenured in the practice.

CONCLUSION

An extensive amount of literature has been published pointing to the correlation between the patient experience and improved outcomes, employee engagement, improved financial metrics, and patient loyalty. This article is not meant to continue to tout the benefits of an already well-known effort, but rather to provide guidance on how to begin to implement or perhaps change the course of a patient experience program already in place. Providing a positive and successful experience is the goal of every oncology practice, and the greatest path to success is when efforts are supported with action so that real improvements can take place. In the end, the patients who we serve are the true beneficiaries of these efforts. ■

