9 Steps to Better Patient Flow and Decreased Readmissions in Your Emergency Department

Increase patient satisfaction and reduce readmissions all while building loyalty, improving retention and your bottom line.
Stericycle Communication Solutions is part of Stericycle, Inc., a global leader in critical and custom services for Commercial businesses and healthcare organizations. Stericycle Communication Solutions team members are dedicated to delivering enhanced experiences through healthcare and commercial contact center solutions. Stericycle Communication Solutions has invested in the infrastructure, technology and people in order to provide world-class communication solutions. Comprising three brands, BerylHealth, NotifyMD, and Appletree Answers, we are committed to our team members’ continuous professional growth and facilitating positive interactions on behalf of our customers.

Our goal is to help hospitals and healthcare organizations deliver a positive patient experience and effectively represent brands to establish a relationship with their patients and prospects.
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Patients don’t see the emergency department as a portion of their experience separate from the total care continuum, especially if they’re admitted. With a growing number of uninsured patients, the emergency department (ED) becomes the easiest access point for care, especially if patients are without a primary care physician, and the entry point for new patient populations into the system. Hospitals and health systems are beginning to see the value of looking at the opportunity this presents for a new patient population and revenue opportunities. Providing contact solutions to ensure top-scoring patient satisfaction, reducing readmissions and identifying ways to capture revenue is key in a time when reimbursement penalties are inevitable and driving change in hospitals across the country.

INTRODUCTION

Healthcare leaders and strategists are looking for simple solutions that the current healthcare system should employ to improve patient care and save costs due to poorly managed care transitions, which are currently contributing to high spending. As we begin to assess current hospital or health system performances as it relates to quality, safety, and the patient experience, consistent follow-up communications and more efficiently managed care coordination are areas of significance; both in the hospital and in the emergency department.

The emergency department also sees a wide range of acuity levels. Chronically ill patients who do not receive the proper follow-up care often end up in the ED and subsequently get readmitted back into the hospital, affecting reimbursement. With 50 percent of hospital inpatient admissions coming through the ED, we look to the opportunity this setting presents for continual patient communication.

Providing appropriate follow-up care across the wide range of patient risk groups can improve patient outcomes, care quality and the overall patient experience. This effective management of a targeted patient population will also increase revenue, improve reimbursements and reduce ED cost and utilization.

DOWNSTREAM REVENUE FROM THE ED

While the emergency department is flooding with patients, there is significant opportunity for downstream revenue by looking at two key factors: reducing risk for readmissions/reimbursement penalties and preventing patient loss from the system after they are released from the emergency department.

Readmissions often occur because of lack of communication and clarity around discharge instructions. Of 1,159 hospitals in a Consumer Reports study, nearly 500 hospitals earned the lowest score for communications regarding new medications and plans following discharge, and none earned the best communication score. “That’s a problem because drug errors in hospitals are common and sometimes serious, and poor discharge planning can lead to readmissions,” according to the report. Readmissions can cause additional stress and suffering for the patient, and with recent changes to Medicare reimbursements, can place a heavy burden upon hospitals that are receiving significant financial penalties as a result of these readmissions.

As uninsured patient numbers rise and ED volume goes up, it’s a common pain point that patients use the ED as an avenue for minor episodic care, but for many of these patients, it’s the first touch-point in the care continuum. It’s key to look at the opportunity this presents. Based on Stericycle Communication Solutions clients using Post-Discharge Services today, more than 40 percent of their patients who visit the ED do not have a primary care physician. Post-discharge communication to this patient population can provide the opportunity to not only check in on these patients from a health and patient satisfaction standpoint, but to also refer and schedule the patient to an in-network physician. This helps improve the patient experience, and reduces the likelihood for readmission or inappropriate use of the emergency department, thus driving downstream revenue as well as patient retention and growth in market share and profitability.
ED CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

In a recent white paper released by Picis entitled The State of the Emergency Department: What Healthcare Leaders are Saying About Their Greatest Challenges and Opportunities, results from a May HealthLeaders Media Intelligence Survey were evaluated to showcase the greatest concerns for 300 top-healthcare leaders around the Emergency Department. Out of nine concerns, patient flow was documented as 43% of the surveyors’ top concern. With reimbursements being top of mind concerns in regards to the ED specifically, it is clear that patient volume and flow, along with readmissions, are areas hospitals and healthcare organizations need to focus on.

Additionally, while patient flow is cumbersome and solutions to assist with better patient flow incorporate and extend far beyond following up and routing a patient to the proper point of care, it’s a very important tactic to consider. By decreasing ED overuse and misuse by referring treat and release patients back in-network to a primary care physician, making the ED patient flow more manageable and accessible.

Considering there is much more to improving patient flow, below are some industry best practices you can incorporate into your hospital or system’s ED processes to create a better patient experience and more efficient ED.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pre-Arrival</th>
<th>Arrival</th>
<th>Discharge &amp; Follow-up</th>
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<td><strong>Tips to:</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>• Reduce Unnecessary Volumes</td>
<td>• Reduce Wait Times</td>
<td>• Avoid Clogging ED with Patients waiting to Leave</td>
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<td>• Avoid Overcapacity</td>
<td>• Enhance the Patient Experience</td>
<td>• Prevent Unnecessary Future ED visits</td>
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<td>Help Patients Find the Least Busy ED: Middlesex Hospital posts wait times for its three EDs that patients can access via smartphones and computers.</td>
<td>Eliminate the Waiting Room: At Penn State Hershey Medical Center, patients are triaged in an ED greeting area, which only contains a few chairs.</td>
<td>Establish a Discharge Lounge: Bellevue Hospital Center’s discharge center is open part-time, five days a week.</td>
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<td>Collaborate to Eliminate Diversions: After targeting zero ambulance diversions, Syracuse hospitals cut total hours on diversions by ~75%.</td>
<td>Tell Patients What to Expect: Orlando Regional Medical Center increased patient satisfaction with a waiting room video on what occurs during an ED visit.</td>
<td>Partner with Health Centers: A Maryland health center works with a local hospital to link eligible patients to a primary care provider at the center.</td>
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<td>Pilot Frequent User Programs: Spectrum Health identified patients who use the ED 10+ times a year—and launched a clinic just for them.</td>
<td>Start the Patient’s Care: Thanks to standing orders for common complaints, University of Kansas Hospital nurses can arrange EKGs and other tests while the patients are waiting.</td>
<td>Navigate to Primary Care: ED navigates at Presbyterian Hospital set up appointments with primary care physicians for non-urgent patients.</td>
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THE TIPPING POINT FOR EMERGENCY DEPARTMENTS

It’s no secret that overuse of emergency departments is a big pain point for hospitals. Recent statistics show that about 56 percent of ED visits are avoidable, resulting in $38 billion annually in wasteful healthcare spending related to emergency department overuse, according to the National Priorities Partnership. According to the Centers for Disease Control, ED visits have increased by 35% between 1998 and 2010, from 94.8 million to 127.27 million. Figure 4

In preparation for an unmanageable influx of patients coming into the system, the care plan focus is shifting to address many patient issues in a streamlined, well-coordinated fashion. Directing these patients back to the appropriate level of care outside of the emergency department provides relief for both the patient and their care providers. Many systems are also finding increased patient satisfaction and HCAHPS scores, starting with patient perceptions within the emergency department.

According to the Studer Group, Hospitals whose EDs are ranked highly by patients on patient satisfaction surveys also perform well on inpatient HCAHPS surveys. Likewise, hospitals whose EDs are rated poorly by patients tend to perform poorly on HCAHPS.

By collectively and seamlessly addressing patient satisfaction, discharge and medication compliance, appointment follow-up and scheduling appointments, hospitals will see better patient compliance, fewer inappropriate visits to the emergency department, reduced readmissions, and improved patient experiences.

Relationship between Emergency Department Percentile Rank and HCAHPS “Overall” Percentile Rank

- Emergency Department Percentile Rank
- HCAHPS “Overall” Percentile Rank
- Linear HCAHPS “Overall” Percentile Rank

![Graph showing the relationship between Emergency Department Percentile Rank and HCAHPS “Overall” Percentile Rank.](image-url)
FROM THE FIELD: INDUSTRY INSIGHTS

Data Analytics Strengthen the Patient Experience and ED Outreach Effectiveness

Indiana University Health Bloomington, a large Midwest, integrated multi-hospital health system implemented ED post-discharge calling after it experienced poor satisfaction scores in the emergency department. The ED’s “overall rating of care” and “would you recommend” questions were tracked and compared over a four-year period of time, and satisfaction results proved higher for those patients who received the post-discharge follow-up call. In 2011 alone, patients who received a follow-up call ranked their quality care satisfaction 16.1 percent higher than those patients who did not receive follow-up communications. Additionally, patients who received a follow-up call stated they were almost 11 percent more likely to recommend the health system to others in the community than those who did not receive follow-up communication.

Patients who were seen in the emergency department and received follow-up calls become increasingly more satisfied with their overall quality of care as they feel they are being monitored and cared for by the hospital across the entire care continuum.

By collectively and seamlessly addressing patient satisfaction, discharge and medication compliance, appointment follow-up and scheduling appointments during these touch-points, other hospitals will too see better patient compliance, fewer inappropriate visits to the emergency department, reduced readmissions and improved patient experiences.

The Solution

While it is certainly true that emergency department overuse is a major pain point for hospitals, it can also serve as a point of connection between hospitals and patients. The key for hospitals is to have a carefully crafted follow-up plan put into place in order to connect with those patients after discharge and efficiently reroute them to the proper point of care through follow-up referrals. By taking this approach, hospitals are turning a negative (emergency department overuse) into a positive (an entry point for the consumer into the hospital system and patient database).

Overall, post-discharge communication works to:

- Improve population health management among high-risk patients
- Boost patient compliance
- Improve the patient experience
- Provide opportunities for more efficient care coordination and
- Prevent unnecessary readmissions

Specifically, by looking into strategic post-discharge planning and outbound communications, healthcare organizations can heavily impact their bottom line by:

- Shielding their reimbursement exposure
- Routing ED patients to the proper point of care, in-network

When planning a strategic post-discharge and outbound communications plan, it is important to remember that not all hospitals and systems are the same. The same goes for the patient. In structuring these plans, looking at industry best practice and benchmarks as reference is always a great starting point, but be sure to consider what uniquely works for your hospital and your patients when creating your follow-up plan. In regards to the patient, targeting and understanding your patient population and the different demographic segments enables more effective communication and a better patient experience.
MEASURE YOUR RETURN ON ED FOLLOW-UP EFFORTS TO DRIVE PATIENT RETENTION AND DOWNSTREAM REVENUE

Direct and prompt follow-up to treated and released patients also yields better patient retention and financial return. BerylHealth, a Stericycle Communications Solutions Company, hosts an online ED Program ROI Calculator to help hospitals and health systems make smart investments in solutions that will yield proven results and generate downstream revenue. This calculator can be used to drive smarter investment decisions for hospitals looking to adapt their delivery models for healthcare reform and are seeking innovative ways to drive patient acquisition, retention and loyalty in evolving competitive markets. Below is an example of a standard entry:
REAL, ACTIONABLE RESULTS AND INSIGHTS

The ED Program and ROI Estimates Calculator yields real and actionable results, using real industry, baseline examples to build an algorithm to generate accurate results on a return on investment of an ED follow-up referral program. As shown below, the potential revenue is calculated by totaling revenue for three considerations. By totaling potential revenue from routed treat and release patients to the proper primary care physician, considering patient leakage from the system or patient retention revenue, and considering reductions of future chronic costs due to ensuring patients connect with a physician after they leave the emergency room, we arrive at the Annual Financial Return Estimate:

<table>
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<th>Description</th>
<th>Amount</th>
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<tr>
<td>PCP Office Visit Revenue</td>
<td>$83,600.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leakage Reduction Revenue</td>
<td>$2,200,000.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chronic Patient Cost reduction</td>
<td>$11,220,000.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Financial Return</td>
<td>$13,503,000.00</td>
</tr>
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WHY THIS IS IMPORTANT

Many hospitals and hospital systems today are struggling to keep patients in their networks. One key area where this disruption in consistent care delivery occurs is from the Emergency Department to the primary or specialist care needed as follow-up. This calculator estimates the potential financial return for referring ED patients back into the hospital network or available community resources when appropriate. Retaining that patient within the hospital system for follow-up care ensures consistent patient care and experience between settings and yields significant downstream revenue. Compliance with follow-up care has also yielded lower readmission rates and unnecessary emergency department visits, saving hospitals additional cost associated with repeat episodes of care.

Following up with ED patients 24 hours after their visit allows you to ensure that they are using your doctors for the follow-up care that was prescribed in their discharge instructions. It also provides an opportunity to see if any new symptoms have developed. For chronic patients, this is a very effective method tool for providing excellent follow-up care and avoiding costly readmissions. Please see below for your potential financial return for referring ED patients back into your preferred network.

Give it a Try!

Use this complimentary tool, provided by BerylHealth, a Stericycle Communication Solutions company, to calculate results specific to your healthcare organization.

Discover your potential revenue from patient leakage reductions, primary care physician office visits, and cost reductions for chronic patient care. Try it today. Visit BerylHealth.com or go straight to the calculator tool by scanning the QR code.
ABOUT STERICYCLE COMMUNICATION SOLUTIONS

Stericycle Communication Solutions is dedicated to improving relationships between healthcare providers and the communities they serve. We help hospitals and medical groups become the “top of mind” provider by building lasting consumer relationships. By providing a compassionate, personal touch, robust data, and customizable solutions, Stericycle Communication Solutions extends the brand of the local provider through every patient contact, and provides hospitals with business insights that allow them to enhance their reputation and achieve their strategic goals.

At Stericycle Communication Solutions, we understand that the patient experience extends far beyond the touch points between entering the Emergency Department and the point-of-care. The “before and after” care connection points are essential in providing a high-quality and consistent experience. We work collaboratively with our clients to ensure they build lasting patient relationships.

Robust Suite of Services

Stericycle Communication Solutions offers a suite of services built to address the needs of patients no matter where they are in their experience — accessing and scheduling care, care delivery, follow-up care and population health management. This experience enables us to seamlessly connect patients with the right touch at the right time and ensure your organization is maximizing downstream revenue and return on your marketing investment.

How We Can Help Your ED

Stericycle Communication Solutions covers all of your ED Follow-up Referral and Post-Discharge bases. With these services, Stericycle Communication Solutions places emergency department follow-up calls to recent treat and release patients and follow-up calls to recently discharged patients. Through ED Follow-up Referral, Stericycle Communication Solutions strives to keep patients in-network, works to efficiently route them to the correct point of care, promotes patient retention and loyalty, and impacts patient satisfaction and downstream revenue. Through our Post-Discharge calling, we are able to assist you with patient follow-up calls monitoring patient satisfaction and compliance of discharge instructions.

Not only are we providing these services but we are also collecting the data that enables positive patient experiences and measurable return on investment. Through Stericycle Communication Solutions’ advanced analytical reporting, hospitals and providers have access to reporting that helps them analyze data to better understand their patient population, develop strategic plans, measure the return on their marketing investment, and enable them to commit resources to addressing issues specific to their hospital.

Stericycle Communication Solutions uses data capture to enhance health and wellness and minimize the need for hospitalization, an important initiative for population health management support. With robust reporting, hospitals and providers can analyze aggregated data to better understand their patient populations, develop strategic plans and commit resources addressing issues specific to the hospital and, ultimately, their community.
STERICYCLE COMMUNICATION SOLUTIONS’ COMMITMENT

We are committed to helping its partners identify opportunities and deliver strategies that will become essential as healthcare moves towards value-based care, population health management and an accountable care model. Our goal is to help hospitals and healthcare organizations deliver a positive patient experience and effectively represent brands to establish a relationship with their patients and prospects.

For more information about Stericycle Communication Solutions and its services, visit www.StericycleCommunications.com or call 866-783-9820.