

and running. The number included 11,000 visits in December, 6,100 in January, and 4,900 in February.

“It was very touching and rewarding to see how everyone responded to [the site],” says Payne. “Some said we were very brave to do this, but it is who we are, what we stand for, and we are very comfortable with it.” She expects the site to evolve and

grow and be linked to the hospital’s advertising efforts in the future.

As far as moving needles on volume or patient satisfaction at St. Anthony, which is part of the St. Louis-based SSM Health Care system, Payne isn’t expecting instant miracles. “We need to let it have a life before we see those things,” she says. Payne does have the satisfac-

tion of knowing that the campaign marries the hospital’s mission to its message in a way that truly connects via social media.

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## ASK THE EXPERT ... BEN DILLON

### Question: How Do I Start a Patient Portal without Breaking the Bank?

Think about the steps involved in a routine surgery. First, there are the preoperative appointments. The preregistration process. The insurance inquiries. Then there’s the actual surgery. The discharge process. The follow-up appointments. Perhaps there’s physical therapy. And let’s not forget about paying the bill. Questions arise throughout the process that require phone calls to the hospital.

Patient care doesn’t only occur within hospital walls. Patients interact with organizations before, during, and after they are in the building. A majority of the before and after interactions can take place online via patient portals.

Portals give both hospitals and patients more control of the patient experience. They give patients access to more health information and improve physician-patient communications. If implemented effec-

tively, they can improve the delivery of care and reduce costs associated with delivering that care.

Yet many hospitals are still hesitant to move into the patient portal arena. The initiative is seen as overwhelming and perhaps prohibitively expensive. It *is* overwhelming and expensive *if* the organization is implementing a portal that’s integrated with an electronic medical record (EMR) or other clinical health information. What many hospitals don’t realize is they can move ahead to implement a portal that isn’t integrated with back-end systems – allowing them to get into the portal space faster and at a fraction of the cost.

#### Types of portals

Patient portals today fall within a wide range. At one end of the spectrum are patient portals that are fully integrated with back-end systems such as EMRs. Patient portals that build on a current Web presence, offering advanced transactional features and making the experience more personal with patient-maintained health information, are at the other end of the spectrum.

“Most hospitals and health systems are intimidated by the process of

implementing a fully integrated portal,” says Dan Ansel, president and CEO of Private Health News, an e-health communications strategy firm in Cincinnati. “The big players, like Mayo and Kaiser, are early adopters of this type of technology. They have the money and time to invest in figuring it out. The average community hospital is more likely to wait for best practices to be determined before following suit.”

Terry McGeeney, MD, MBA, president and CEO of TransforMed, a Leawood, KS, consulting firm that helps primary care practices improve processes and care delivery, expands on Ansel’s thoughts. “The technology that is available today and the technology that will fundamentally change how healthcare is delivered is not the same,” McGeeney says. “But you have to get started somewhere, and building the online experience first makes sense.”

For many hospitals, “to get started somewhere” means building on the Web site investments already in place. Doing so allows organizations to offer consumers and patients many of the benefits of a fully integrated portal, while removing much of the upfront costs and risks. Moving ahead in a staged approach

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allows quick wins with both health consumers and internal stakeholders.

### Advanced transactional features

The average hospital Web site most likely offers transactional features such as appointment request and preregistration. A hospital can take that functionality to the next level by adding portal features such as bill presentation and payment. Another popular portal feature is secure messaging, which allows users to send and receive messages over a connection designed to safeguard private information. This feature requires following the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA) and Payment Card Industry (PCI) guidelines, but not expensive integration.

Genesis Health System in Davenport, IA, launched its second-generation patient portal in July 2009. Although it isn't integrated with back-end systems, the portal offers a number of advanced transactional features. "I wanted to get a foundation in place [that] we could build on," explains Kenneth Croken, vice president of corporate communications and marketing at Genesis. "As a three-hospital health system, we have a lot of departments to get on board and a lot of systems to integrate. That's why we began with a portal that can stand alone – so we can integrate our back-end systems after we launch."

For Genesis, a feature such as preregistration with a secure messaging component was just one way to leverage patients visiting its Web site and convert them into portal users as a further stage in building a relationship.

### Making it personal

In a patient portal that isn't fully integrated with an EMR, personal information is provided by the user or manually entered by the health

system. The portal is constructed with the goal of making this information valuable to both the user and the health system.

Genesis Health System's portal allows site visitors to securely log into the portal application and create a personal profile. They can create forms, save and return to them later, and submit information about themselves and other family members.

These personal accounts let users manage information for their entire family. They can schedule appointments and view all appointments in one calendar, while also accessing information on other family health obligations such as classes, support groups, and health-related reminders. The feature requires no costly integration.

Since a key goal is to help patients take a more active role in managing their health, portal functionality focuses on allowing patients to easily track their health information. Hospital portals offer varying levels of personal health records, including the ability to store information on health history, physicians, prescriptions, medical emergency contacts, lab results, disease trackers, health risk assessment results, and advanced directives.

The portal that Genesis created also helps patients manage their health by taking the information that users submit about themselves and making suggestions based on their preferences, much like the Amazon.com model.

For example, portal users are offered the opportunity to sign up for a customized e-newsletter. The e-newsletter is seen as a way to build ongoing relationships and connect with people who either have or care for a family member with a chronic condition – the same audience that is

most likely to regularly use a patient portal.


If a portal user signs up for a pregnancy e-newsletter, Genesis can take this information and build on it, sending messages to the user about the birth centers or upcoming prenatal classes at its hospitals.

"To connect with consumers today, you need to present them with personal and relevant messages," says Ansel. "And then you need to engage them long-term. Offer a continuing benefit and keep them coming back."

### Increasing importance

Most hospitals know patient portals need to be on their radar in some form. Whether that translates into taking the leap into a fully integrated patient portal or taking a more measured approach like Genesis, portals will become more common.

That's because technology provides an opportunity to improve care delivery and reduce costs.

"Healthcare the way it is currently being delivered is broken," says McGeeney. "To fix it will require rethinking patient care, particularly when it comes to patients with chronic conditions. To help these patients manage their conditions, providers will need to invest in technologies like EMRs, decision support functionality, and most important, technology that will allow critical information to flow back and forth securely between the patient and the doctor. Portals will be this conduit." 

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