Time Is of the Essence

Value in healthcare or any business, for that matter, means being patient-centered or client-centered. Put the needs of the patient first. One need of the patient is to not have to wait for care but to have care provided in a timely and efficient manner. This is true for any business.

The other day I was reviewing comments about a medical practice in my area on Yelp!, the app that rates all different kinds of businesses. You may be familiar with it as a tool to find out about restaurants. It also gives customer feedback for healthcare providers. This is one of the comments that I found:

"NEW PATIENTS BEWARE!!! Never have I had such a consistently poor health care experience….

I've been to 3 visits and never waited less than 40 minutes to see provider even with a first morning appt. At my physical I was told that we did not have enough time to address my concerns because she had to get on to 'the next one' after I had waited 50 minutes. This was my annual physical from a brand new primary care physician!" Needless to say, the patient switched physicians.

Would you want this kind of posting to be out on social media about your site or practice? I hope that you do not. To avoid this kind of negative feelings you will need to effectively manage the time that patients spend with you.

Let me give you an example of how this may be done. I am working with Calvin College Rehabilitation Services in Grand Rapids, Michigan. They are beginning a new fall prevention program for seniors this spring. Seniors will go through the program in small groups—10 to 30—and work with staff to improve their abilities to avoid falls. According to the Center for Disease Control Steadi web site (https://www.cdc.gov/steadi/index.html), 1 in 4 seniors over the age of 65 falls at least once over a period of one year. Twenty-five percent of those that fall will need medical care. In Ohio, the cost of this care is $11,000 per incident.

The first time the patients encounter the program staff they will be assessed of their current state of ability to avoid falls. This includes the following assessments:
- TUG
- ABC Balance Confidence Scale
- Montreal Cognitive Assessment
- Glucose
- Blood Pressure

In order to understand better how much time patients spend in the assessment, patient navigators will choose a patient and follow him through each assessment, timing each assessment and recording the times at each station. Navigators will also measure the time a patient waits between stations. This will be done with several patients. After the assessments are complete, the time data will be compiled and averaged for each assessment. A chart and histogram will be

created for the average time at each station and for wait times and shared with the providers. The team of providers and I will work to find ways to even out the time spent at each station or increase the number of stations for those assessments which take longer. It should take no more staff to decrease the wait times. The goal is to have each patient move from one station to the next without having to wait for a station to 'open' or to have the wait minimalized.

By eliminating or minimalizing wait times, patient satisfaction with this part of the program should be high. Patient satisfaction with the assessment phase will be measured at the end of the program with a survey of each participant. Satisfaction with other parts of the program will also be measured then.

The next time a new group of patients is assessed the revised assessment process will be implemented. Again, navigators will follow patients and collect data on the time spent at each station and the time spent waiting to begin another assessment. The new data will be analyzed to see if there are improvements. Again, the team will look to find ways to make the process even better. The cycle of measuring and improving the process to decrease wait times will continue throughout the development and implementation of the program.

The process of minimizing wait times not only benefits patients but also providers. Providers will feel like they have the time to effectively administer the assessments without having to hurry. There will be time for patient and provider to effectively communicate with one another, which will improve the satisfaction of both.

The process of measuring wait times and finding ways to reduce wait time can be implemented in a wide variety of settings. This process can be used to significantly decrease the time a patient spends waiting for an appointment at an outpatient clinic. My own physician group has effectively minimalized wait time at his office. I have never had to wait more than five minutes in the waiting room. If the provider group mentioned above had used this process then there likely would be glowing recommendations on Yelp! And other social media.

Hospitals can use this process to reduce wait times in a wide variety of settings. Wait times for labs, wait time for entering surgery areas, wait time for nurses to respond in an inpatient setting can significantly be reduced.

As I mentioned in previous newsletters, the AMA has a website StepsForward that has some very good training modules on improving the quality and value of care at healthcare sites. There are 14 modules that focus upon Workflow and Processes (https://www.stepsforward.org/modules?sort=recent&category=workflow), including more detailed descriptions of the tool that I have described. One that you may find especially useful is 'Implementing Team-Based Care'.

As you can see, decreasing wait time is very important in improving patient satisfaction. The process of reducing wait times is team-based process and effective teams can make effective improvements using the tool that I have described. The outcomes of continually improving the flow of patients through your site is a Win-Win for both patient and provider.