

Alberta Doctors' Digest

Patient portals provide increased transparency in health care

I was recently seeing a patient for heart failure; her echocardiogram had revealed severe aortic stenosis. I was preparing to explain the diagnosis when the patient offered a surprising response – she had already been educated on her diagnosis.

She had accessed her echo report through the MyAHS Connect portal, then done her own research on credible websites. She had looked into the options of aortic valve replacement and TAVI with her sister, who is a nurse, serving as a helpful guide. Ultimately, we had a unique conversation, talking much more deeply about her condition and its management. It was quite a learning experience for me.

Transparency is becoming increasingly important in our public institutions. We expect full disclosure from organizations such as the government, the justice system and universities. Now the health care industry is getting on board, too, with the introduction of patient portals. These portals give patients faster access to their medical records like lab results, diagnoses and doctors' notes. A new law in the USA reinforces this shift. Known as the *Cures Act*, this national policy requires health care providers to give patients access to all health information in their electronic medical records without delay and without charge.

In Canada, only six provinces offer patient portal services, with each providing different types of data. Alberta, for example, offers the MyHealth Records system, which supplies patients with immunization, medication and lab test information. Recently, MyHealth Records have started to provide diagnostic imaging and cardiology reports. In addition, AHS patients of facilities using Connect Care are allowed access to their Connect Care record through MyAHS Connect, which allows them to view their lab and imaging results and communicate with their health care team.

Research has demonstrated that patient portals promote timely clinical communication and foster patient engagement. Furthermore, patient portals make it easier for patients to keep in touch with their health care team via secure patient-provider messaging, appointment scheduling and e-visits, which allow them to have questions answered promptly.

Many patient advocates believe that the benefits of giving patients immediate access to their laboratory/imaging results outweigh any potential negatives. This access could lead to a much higher level of patient engagement and a greater sense of control over their health. However, it may also bring about anxiety and confusion as patients may not be able to correctly interpret the results. Even so, some believe that the apprehension and stress of not knowing the consequences are worse than just receiving them and having to process them.

A Canadian study showed that patient portal registration was associated with increased traditional appointments and clerical workload for providers. Other studies have demonstrated that patient portals are linked to improvements in patients' functional status and reductions in high-cost care. Despite the issues, numerous surveys indicate

that most physicians support patient portals and will recommend them to their colleagues.

With increased transparency, patients are better equipped to demand better from their health care system. Patient portals are a small step in the right direction.

The views, perspectives and opinions in this article are solely the author's and do not necessarily represent those of the AMA.