Health care systems and the move toward partnerships

By MARCIA FRELLICK

With the shift to value-based care and increased competition, some of the biggest health care players in Washington state have joined forces in recent months.

THE MATCHES ARE VERY DIFFERENT in the nature of the organizations and the terms of the agreements, but similar in that those seeking partners were looking for the institution that would allow them to keep their core values, but make them stronger.

As Rick Cooper, CEO of The Everett Clinic, which is one of the merging partners, put it: “Culture trumps strategy every day of the week.”

Here’s a glimpse into how practices are changing through three of the most recent partnerships.

Memorial and Virginia Mason

SINCE YAKIMA VALLEY Memorial Hospital and Virginia Mason Health System affiliated Jan. 1, meetings have started with a standard practice.

First the boards, which now contain members of each other’s institutions, talk through patient stories and the lessons learned. Then they review their mission. “If a patient wakes up in the hospital, we want him not to know whether he’s in Yakima or Seattle,” said Martin Brueggemann, MD, chief medical officer at Yakima Valley Memorial Hospital (part of Memorial Family of Services). “We want the two systems to be so integrated that it doesn’t matter which side of the mountains you’re on. You’ll get the same care.”

Dr. Brueggemann said gastroenterology is one example of a department that will expand with the affiliation. “We have a very strong gastroenterology program at our hospital,” he said, “but for the most part we are generalists. Virginia Mason, on the other continued on page 3

SAVE THE DATE!

Kevin Pho, MD to keynote WSMA annual meeting

R. KEVIN PHO, founder and editor of the popular health care-focused website KevinMD.com, will present the keynote address at the 2016 Annual Meeting of the WSMA House of Delegates, Oct. 1–2 at the Hilton Seattle Airport & Conference Center, Seattle. Be sure to save the date!
THE MOST REVOLUTIONARY way for physicians to improve the quality of care they provide? Treat patients like people.

It sounds simple, but when physicians are grappling with competing priorities and time pressures, the basics of patient-centered care—empathy, respect and communication—can fall by the wayside.

As more patients become informed health care consumers, they place increasing value on how well physicians score on publicly reported patient experience surveys. From the initial call to schedule an appointment to post-visit follow ups, patients expect quality, safety and excellence. Physicians who demonstrate commitment to making their patients feel valued reap the benefits of higher patient loyalty, lower risk of malpractice complaints and better patient health outcomes.

In response to this shift in consumer values and reflecting a commitment to achieving the goals of the Quadruple Aim—better health outcomes, lower costs, improved patient experience and improved clinician experience—health care leaders across Washington state are propelling patient-centeredness to the forefront of their quality improvement initiatives.

In February, the Washington Health Alliance released a report, “Your Voice Matters: Patient Experience with Primary Care Providers in Washington State.” The report, which features findings from a survey sent to more than 181,000 patients across Washington state, shows pockets of excellence when it comes to providing effective patient-centered care. However, opportunities for improvement exist as Washington state continues to lag behind on national benchmarks.

Notably, the report reflects a focus on patient experience instead of patient satisfaction. Patient satisfaction refers to how pleased patients were with the care they received. Patient experience refers to what happens when patients interact with the health care system to have their needs met.

Of all the survey measures, respondents indicated that effective communication skills and provider knowledge of the patient were the most important factors for shaping a positive patient experience. The Polyclinic in Seattle and Cascade Medical in Leavenworth performed exceptionally well in these areas.

Dr. Tony Butruille, family medicine physician at Cascade Medical, says “physician self-care is the key to forging strong relationships with patients. When providers take time to recharge themselves away from the workplace, they are best equipped to give patients their full attention and energy.”

Cascade Medical’s administrative leaders are committed to sustaining a healthy, supportive environment for physicians. Instead of pushing production-driven demands, such as requiring their doctors to see a certain number of patients each day, they encourage physicians to take time to cultivate meaningful relationships with their patients. As a result, physicians at Cascade Medical have the time and energy to perform small, yet meaningful gestures, such as calling their patients personally to see how they are feeling after a visit, or devoting extra time at the end of an appointment to answer questions.

However, excessive administrative burden can seriously impede a physician’s self-care efforts. Several of his colleagues put in a full day of work only to then confront mountains of documentation paperwork when they get home. Says Butruille, “this ‘work away from work’ damages both physician well-being and patient experience.”

Through its Healthy Doctors, Healthier Patients initiative, the WSMA is collaborating with health care leaders to challenge regulations imposed at the state and federal levels that put doctors on a fast track to burnout. By raising awareness and leading legislative efforts, the WSMA aims to protect the well-being of physicians across the state and support them in taking care of patients and themselves.

Dr. Robbie Sherman, medical director of patient experience and physician development at The PolyClinic, places empathetic communication at the core of the clinic’s thriving patient-centered culture. Clearly, it works. The PolyClinic achieved the highest scores on all five measures in the Alliance’s patient experience report.
The literature agrees with Sherman. Studies show expressing empathy and strong provider-patient communication leads to higher physician job satisfaction, happier patients2,3 and better health outcomes because patients are more likely to follow clinical recommendations4.

Sherman teaches a course on how to enhance empathy and communication skills within a clinical setting. Physicians sometimes express hesitation when it comes to learning to express empathy. They claim that some people are born empathetic, some aren’t, and that innate traits cannot be changed. Sherman believes otherwise.

“Empathy and communication are skills that can be taught just like anything else,” she said.

“There are certain steps physicians who struggle with these skills can take to improve their interactions with patients,” says Sherman. For example, opening the

appointment with a warm greeting and introductions can strengthen the lines of communication. “You have to have ‘small talk’ before you can have ‘big talk,’” says Sherman.

Sherman also emphasizes the importance of active listening. When patients tell their own stories, clinicians can uncover diagnostic clues, hidden fears and concerns that can aid in providing the best possible treatment.

Above all, incorporating empathy can transform a neutral patient experience into a positive one. Sherman says physicians do not need to take on their patient’s entire life story. However, validating their emotions (“I can see why this is frightening to you”), acknowledging their pain (“I’m sorry this is happening to you”) and supporting them through the process (“We’ll work through this together”) can make a significant impact.

Closing the appointment by collaborating with the patient on their treatment plan and checking for understanding leaves the patient feeling like their voice is valued.

Sherman understands that the work physicians do can be hard and exhausting. However, she notes that research shows empathetic communication with patients turns out to be faster and more efficient5,6, which helps make for a more pleasant and rewarding work experience7.

“Empathy shouldn’t be left to the people who are naturally good at it. Everyone can learn and benefit from using these skills,” she said.

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