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Marianne Burke

Peggy Carey

Fred Pond

Laura Haines

Alan Lampson

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Information Rx as Patient-Physician Communication Tool and Community Health Information Program

Marianne Burke, AHIP, MLS Director, Dana Medical Library, Peggy Carey, MD, Family Medicine, Fred Pond, MLS, Dana Medical Library, Laura Haines, MLS, Dana Medical Library, University of Vermont, Burlington, VT; Alan Lampson, MLS, Community Health Improvement, Fletcher Allen Health Care, Burlington, VT

Background

Patient education, communication and empowerment are critical aspects of management of chronic conditions.[1] Patient involvement and education is encouraged as part of patient safety goals[2], but, physicians have little time for discussion and a handout collection for all conditions is hard to maintain.

On the other hand, Americans of all ages, genders, and groups are seeking and finding health information on the Internet. Though effective for many, problems include ineffective searching, unreliable sources, and prevalence of commercial interests.[3]

The Information Prescription Program (*Information Rx*) developed by the National Library of Medicine (NLM) and the American College of Physicians (ACP) Foundation promotes a way for the physician to recommend quality information about health and empower patients to seek and use information on their own.[4]

The project, funded by the National Network of Libraries of Medicine New England Region, is currently underway through July 2008.

Objectives

The study describes a collaborative project to:

1) integrate the *Information Rx* program as developed by NLM and the ACP Foundation into a community-based medical practice, and

2) develop the capacity of the nearby public library to provide health information services and specifically to follow up on information prescriptions.

References:

1. Coleman MT, Newton KS. Supporting self-management in patients with chronic illness. *American Family Physician* 2005; 72: 1503-10.
2. Joint Commission International Center for Patient Safety http://www.jcipatientsafety.org/22804/ (accessed April 10, 2008)
3. Madden M., Fox S. Finding answers online in sickness and in health May 2006 http://www.pewinternet.org/PPF/r/183/report_display.asp (accessed February 13, 2008)
4. Siegel ER et al, Information Rx: Evaluation of a new informatics tool for physicians, patients, and libraries. *Information Services and Use*. 2006; 26(1): 1–10
5. The InfoRx toolkits included pre-printed prescription pads are distributed by both NLM and ACP Foundation and may be ordered online at http://foundation.acponline.org/hl/inforx.htm and http://nnlm.gov/hip/infoRx/placeorder.html

Setting

Fletcher Allen HEALTH CARE — In alliance with The University of Vermont

Milton Family Practice (Milton VT) is an outpatient clinic of Fletcher Allen Health Care, the affiliated hospital of the University of Vermont Academic Health Center. It is located about 15 miles north of the main campus.

The providers at this setting are faculty at the University of Vermont College of Medicine and the site hosts the Family Medicine residency program.

The Milton Public Library is located near the medical site and offers many literacy and educational services to the community. The target population at the medical site includes physicians, residents, nurses, and mental health clinicians. The population at the public library includes librarians, staff, and volunteers.

Methods

- A pre-intervention survey to ascertain providers' awareness and use of consumer-oriented health information including *MedlinePlus* and the *Information Rx*
- Education and advocacy of *Information Rx* and *MedlinePlus* at physician, resident, and nursing staff meetings and individual consultations
- Installation of an internet accessible computer/printer for patient use to fill information prescriptions
- Installation of a computer/printer dedicated to patient education and evidence-based literature for provider use
- Distribution and display of informational materials on *MedlinePlus* and *InfoRx* at the medical practice[5]
- A survey of knowledge and awareness of librarians and staff conducted at the nearby Milton Public Library
- Education sessions on *MedlinePlus* and consumer health information sessions held for public library staff and patrons
- Distribution and display of informational materials on *MedlinePlus* and *InfoRx* at the public library

Results

In the pre-project survey, most (3 out of 5) providers professed proficiency at using the Internet and to find information for patients, but 2 acknowledged inadequacy based on uncertainty of best websites or lack of ready computer/printer access.

Implementation of the intervention methods required detailed collaboration with the practice manager on office protocols to move the project forward. The installation of workstations for patients and providers dedicated to evidenced-based Internet resources was a positive incentive for participation by the practice but it required much detailing, and communication to reach mutual understanding. A tie-line phone connected to the hospital community resource library for patient use was suggested by the Practice Supervisor and implemented. Anecdotally, some physicians are giving 1-4 information Rx's per day.

A physician prescribes information

A post-project survey in May 2008 will show how knowledge, awareness, and participation by providers, residents and staff have changed.

The public library staff received training on *MedlinePlus* and is aware that patients may come to them for help.

A *MedlinePlus* educational session was held at the Milton Senior Center with 25 citizens attending.

A post-project survey of library staff will be taken.

Discussion and Conclusions

The *Information Rx* program, described by NLM and the ACP Foundation is an effective, practical methodology but, for many providers, institutional practices or policies need to be considered before it is accepted and used. The public library may improve its effectiveness as a health information provider through staff training and program development.

For further information contact:

marianne.burke@uvm.edu

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