

The NewYork-Presbyterian Portal Help Desk: Helping Patients Make the Most of Data Access

Patient portals are an opportunity for individuals, their family members and their caregivers to electronically access, download and share their health information. However, providers have struggled to maximize portal registration and use, while patients often have a hard time using the portal or finding the correct information on it. NewYork-Presbyterian (NYP), a health care delivery system in New York City, has implemented a Help Desk to help patients overcome common challenges to using its patient portal.

NYP launched its MyNYP patient portal in 2009 and quickly learned that achieving the full potential of MyNYP required more than great software: It required real-life support for people using the portal. NYP launched the portal Help Desk in 2012; before that, user questions were fielded by a single staff member. Now, the Help Desk is run by four full-time staff who speak English, Spanish and Chinese and use the hospital's interpretation service to address additional language needs. The Help Desk responded to 200–300 requests each week in 2012 and now fields 120–160 each week. NYP staff not only solve technological issues, but also help patients get oriented to the site and find the information that they need on it.

“The support desk is a worthwhile investment because the patient will always need someone to talk to.”

— Juana Romero, Project Leader

How it Works

Individuals are encouraged to submit a request form online, which allows the Help Desk team to track and respond to requests. Patients select one of the following categories for assistance: compliment, issue with user ID/password, patient invite, unable to match my records, unable to view my records, or other. They also input details and their preferred method of contact. Before responding, Help Desk staff verifies the individual's relationship with NYP (current patient, most recent hospital visit, etc.) and checks for some of the most common errors (misspelling of name or lack of hyphenation, month/date convention for date of birth, etc.).

Patients can speak to a customer service representative via phone Monday through Friday from noon to 5:00 p.m. ET, or leave a voicemail outside that time that is automatically translated into email and sent to the Help Desk inbox.

While NYP saw the *volume* of help desk requests go down after implementing a new portal platform with better functionality in 2016, the *complexity* of requests has gone up, meaning staff spend more time trying to address each problem. This points to increased patient engagement with the information in the portal.



The NYP Help Desk staff

Prioritizing Patient Needs

The NYP Help Desk motto is “acknowledge, apologize and amend” because the Help Desk staff prioritizes customer service in the standards they have developed for responding to requests. Staff responds to online requests in one to two business days whenever possible. The team works to resolve the issue at first contact; for requests that require more time and coordination, staff tries to resolve it in three to five business days.

Rather than referring patients elsewhere, Help Desk staff tries to resolve issues directly, even when doing so requires working with other NYP departments and facilities. For example, patients often want information that predates the electronic health record system or is not routinely made available on the patient portal, like certain categories of sensitive health information. To address this, the Help Desk works with the Medical Records department to upload that data to the patient’s myNYP account free of charge (after the patient has submitted a signed medical records request form). This connection between the IT and medical records departments is a best practice for making information more accessible for patients and families.

Lessons Learned

For hospitals and medical practices looking to improve the use of their patient portal or implement a similar Help Desk, NYP’s experience offers a few key lessons:

1. Think about the portal as a way to enhance patient engagement in health care, rather than simply an IT tool.
2. Establish standards for responding to patient requests so there is a consistent, high-quality process in place.
3. Offer comprehensive service. Fully resolve the patient’s issue rather than refer her or him elsewhere. Doing this effectively will require the cultivation and maintenance of trusted relationships with other hospital departments and facilities, especially the medical records department.

Get Involved!

GetMyHealthData is supporting hospitals and medical practices in New York to identify and spread new approaches to making health information accessible and actionable for consumers. If you want help making your information-sharing processes more patient- and family-centered, email erin@getmyhealthdata.org.

Common Patient Requests

- **Technical:** Resetting passwords, resending registration auto-invitations
- **Administrative:** “Why can’t I see the records I’m looking for?”
 - Not looking in the right place
 - Information not yet available (i.e., lab results)
 - Sensitive information not routinely made available
- **Billing**
- **Clinical**
 - Interpretation: what do these results mean?
 - How to submit prescription refill requests
- **Upcoming appointments**
- **Corrections / updates to record**
 - “I’ve never been a smoker in my life!”
 - Incorrect demographic information (i.e., race / ethnicity)

“If we have the patient on the phone, we are going to help them. Patients have already spoken with number of people for help and don’t want to speak to another person ... [We] hold dear that the patients have a positive experience.”

— Juana Romero, Project Leader
