

THE Value Initiative

Members in Action: Improve Quality and Patient Outcomes

Geisinger Health System – Danville, Penn.

Refunds to Dissatisfied Patients Drives Process Improvement

The AHA's Members in Action series highlights how hospitals and health systems are implementing new value-based strategies to improve health care affordability. This includes work to redesign the delivery system, manage risk and new payment models, improve quality and outcomes and implement operational solutions.

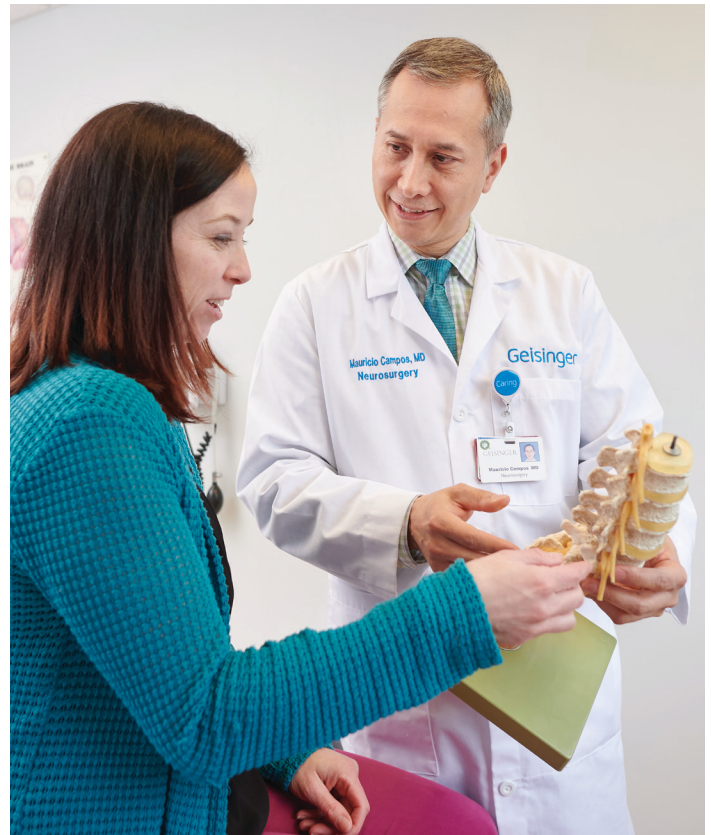
Overview

To improve the patient experience and invite constructive criticism, Geisinger Health System offers refunds to patients as a means of identifying and fixing service delivery issues. As part of its patient experience improvement program, ProvenExperience®, Geisinger refunds dissatisfied patients' deductibles, copays and co-insurance – no questions asked.

Patients can contact patient experience officers or rate their experiences on an app and may request a refund if they are not satisfied. A patient advocacy team then researches complaints and takes steps to ensure the underlying problem is fixed. Patient complaints most often involve scheduling appointments, billing processes, care delivery and provider behavior. Refunds also have been issued for delays in receiving meals and construction noise. A minority of complaints pertain to the quality of care.

The rationale for starting the program in November 2015 was to encourage criticism, inviting patients to alert staff of areas they could improve. An initial four-month pilot focused on bariatric and spinal surgical patients with high copayments. In March 2016, the initiative expanded to all 10 hospitals in Pennsylvania and New Jersey. An underlying principle is that patients are motivated to help improve the system, not cheat it.

Another element of ProvenExperience® involves training Geisinger's 30,000 employees in on-the-spot service recovery – helping dissatisfied patients become satisfied – and addressing the root cause. Parking passes, meal vouchers and gift shop



Geisinger's patient refund program is designed to invite feedback so the health system can improve the customer experience.

certificates are available in all service areas, and every employee is authorized to dispense them. ProvenExperience® also includes initiatives dedicated to improving communication, leadership rounding, uniform standards and respectful interactions with patients and families.

Impact

Through April 2018, Geisinger refunded patients almost \$1 million, averaging 108 patients and \$265 per refund or adjustment per month. When possible, requests are handled as adjustments (79% of the time) prior to bills being issued and balances being paid, rather than as refunds (21% of the time). The initiative achieved the goal of increasing patient feedback – communication between patients and patient experience advocates increased by 23%.

The volume of requests for refunds surged following media coverage and when the offering expanded to additional departments. Geisinger believes the media coverage liberates unhappy patients to seek redress rather than remain silent. Most patients request only partial refunds.

Geisinger added 3.5 full-time equivalents (FTEs) for a total of 15 FTEs in the patient experience department to support the program, and staff dedicated to revenue cycle and data measurement assumed additional responsibilities. One patient experience staff member was added to Chief Executive Officer David Feinberg's office to field calls because he freely gives his cell phone number to the media and the public.

The health system believes the cost of adding staff has been offset by the benefits gained in improving processes and the patient experience. The program has had positive results in the systems rural and urban facilities. Patient satisfaction rates have increased since the launch of the ProvenExperience® initiative, though it is difficult for Geisinger to determine how much of the rise can be attributed solely to the patient refund part of the program.

As a result of patient feedback, Geisinger now offers same-day appointments, has altered construction schedules to decrease noise at night, attempts to recruit staff with a service-minded mentality and trains employees on effective bedside manner. Clinical, revenue cycle and patient experience teams are now working together more effectively by meeting regularly and collaborating on solutions to issues that arise from patient complaints.

Lessons Learned

Over time, Geisinger further refined what expenses qualify for reimbursement. These include co-insurance, copayments and deductibles only, not cash payments for elective procedures. Refunds also only pertain to care delivered since the program started. In addition, the refunds apply only to the issue noted in the complaint. For example, if a patient took issue with one MRI during a weeklong hospital stay, the refund applies to the MRI, not the whole stay. Incidents of misusing the program are rare.

"We went in with the design principle that our patients put their trust in us, so we should put our trust in them," said Jonathan Slotkin, M.D., director of spinal surgery and medical director of Geisinger in Motion, the system's digital patient experience initiative. He advises other health systems that are considering implementing a patient refund program to do so as part of a broader patient experience improvement initiative, and not as a stand-alone effort.

Future Goals

Geisinger plans to apply successful customer experience strategies from other fields. The health system also is researching connections among patient experience, provider engagement and quality.

"We hope others will continue to join us on this journey and share their experiences with us," said Slotkin.

Contact: Jonathan Slotkin, M.D., Associate Chief Medical Informatics Officer
Director of Spinal Surgery, Neuroscience Institute, Geisinger Health

Telephone: (570) 271-6211

Email: jrslotkin@geisinger.edu