

**Engaging Patients, Improving Experiences, and Providing Better Health Care:
A Framework from the Regional Primary Care Coalition of Greater Washington, DC**

Health care providers across the country are adopting the primary principles of Triple Aim: the Institute for Healthcare Improvement's landmark initiative to improve health, enhance patients' health care experiences, and control health care costs. The Regional Primary Care Coalition (RPCC), which is dedicated to improving primary care for low-income people in Washington, DC area, has culled prior research, and the learnings of area primary care providers, to create a six-part framework for increasing patient engagement to improve health outcomes and reduce the cost of health care.

Engaged patients have better experiences, have taken ownership of their health, and are better able to navigate the health care system. In short, engaged patients receive better care and have better health outcomes. RPCC's framework reflects increasing levels of patient participation in and engagement with the health system, beginning with giving feedback on patient satisfaction, to increasing health literacy, to gaining ownership over one's own health, to becoming engaged not only in one's own health but also the health of the community.

Engaging all patients requires participation by a broad range of "stakeholders," including patients, their families, health and social service providers, consumer advocates and health plans:

LEVEL 1: Patient Satisfaction – A critical first step toward patient engagement in the health care system is for stakeholders to gain a baseline understanding of patients' reactions to and experiences in accessing and receiving health care services. Information should be gathered through surveys, interviews, focus groups and/or community stakeholder meetings. All patients, regardless of literacy levels, should be able to participate. A broad range of stakeholders, including patients, should help interpret the findings of this research and be involved in developing follow-up recommendations.

LEVEL 2: Informed Choice – In this stage, patients are provided the knowledge they need to make more informed health care decisions. Stakeholders should review the various ways that providers explain health care choices to patients – including the scope of information presented, the methods used, the time involved and the level of clinician(s) who presents the information. Materials are available in appropriate languages and at appropriate literacy levels to give patients sufficient information to help them make informed choices regarding their health care.

LEVEL 3: Shared Decision Making – At this stage, stakeholders are continuing to build patient-provider communication channels and increase patient literacy during every patient encounter. Patients have a voice in every step of the care process. This phase may also include ongoing education and training of providers to improve their communication skills with patients and increase decision making skills. It is essential that linguistically and culturally appropriate resources be available to both patients and providers for shared decision making to occur.

LEVEL 4: Partnering with Patients – At this level, stakeholder individuals and organizations seek patients’ perspectives in improving the delivery of health care services to communities. Patients become full members of teams responsible for improving health care delivery, such as “quality improvement teams” and “advisory councils” in clinics and hospitals. Through their active involvement in improving health care, patients become better versed in the intricacies of the health care system. At the same time, the health system learns from patients about upstream factors that impact health, such as transportation, housing, social services and education, and it begins to work with community organizations to have a greater impact on the health of the community.

LEVEL 5: Patient Ownership of Their Health – Patients at this level of engagement require minimal support and have high levels of “health literacy,” which is a strong understanding of what is required to make choices in order to stay healthy. Patients are confident that they can make healthy choices when under stress and work closely with their health care providers to make informed decisions. For example, a patient who has taken ownership of his or her own health would only use antibiotics when truly needed because he/she understand the concept of antibiotic resistance.

LEVEL 6: People Engaged in Population Health – At this level of engagement, patients become more engaged in improving the health of their communities by helping their families, friends and other community members navigate the health care system and stay healthy. At this highest level of engagement, patients also understand and advocate for improvements to factors outside the health care system that impact health, such as efficient transportation systems, safe and affordable housing and access to early childhood education.

The goal of this framework is to help individuals and health systems increase patient engagement, to benefit not only patients but also health care providers, health care systems and, ultimately, entire communities. Although health care providers may need to learn new systems and skills to fully engage patients, the end result – educated and engaged patients who can take full responsibility for their care and who lead their communities toward better health – will result in lower health care costs and greater satisfaction of not only patients, but also health care providers.

The Dimensions of Patient Engagement

Patient engagement encompasses both clinical interactions with the health care system as well as community interactions with family, friends, and neighbors. Patients may choose to engage at any dimension, but health care systems and communities must enable patients to engage at the most empowering dimensions. Empowered patients can improve the health of communities and lower the cost of care as patients make healthier choices and help their families and communities do the same.

