Reducing Alert & Information Fatigue in Clinical Settings

Clinicians Are Overloaded

Today's nurses, doctors and other care providers are experiencing an absolutely unprecedented volume of alerts and information overload, leading to an escalation of preventable errors.

Chew on these facts from clinical studies:

- 14 percent of all messages are sent to the wrong recipient (Archives of Internal Medicine)
- 32 percent of all messages go unanswered (Emory University School of Medicine)
- 43 percent of verbal communication is forgotten within 15 minutes

But the real kicker: The Joint Commission states that 67 percent of medical errors are caused by breakdowns in communication. Many of these errors lead to serious consequences for patients and care providers alike. How can clinical environments resolve this big challenge?
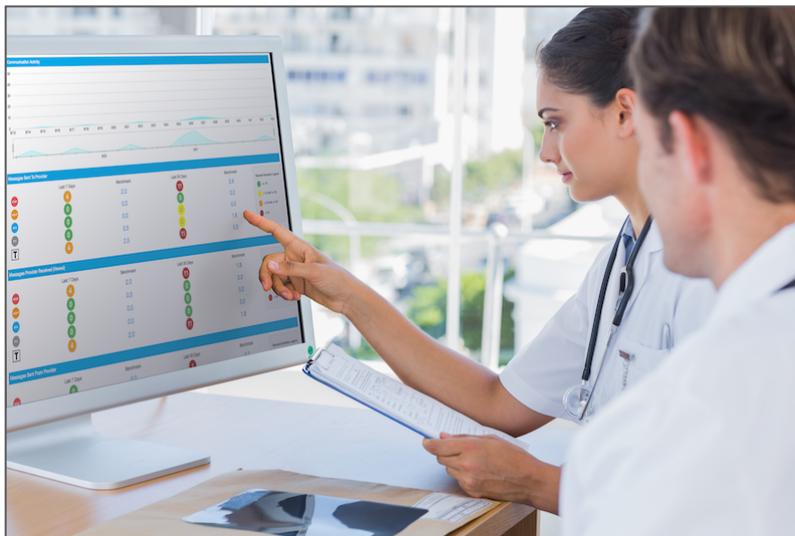
Solving the Challenge of Efficient Healthcare Communication

The stakes are always higher in healthcare—we deal every day with life and death. Perhaps that's one reason the industry has been cautious – even slow – to adopt innovative technologies that lessen the dependence on legacy communications and dramatically improve communications within a patient's care team.

Yet now, with text messaging ubiquitous and healthcare data crooks constantly on the prowl to intercept private healthcare information, simply texting in clinical environments is a serious security and compliance risk. Industry estimates indicate that 70 percent of providers are currently texting unsecurely. It's no wonder that health systems and providers are demanding better, more secure solutions.

In the face of this ever-increasing risk, it's surprising and concerning that 53 percent of hospitals have yet to put <u>any</u> unified communications system in place. Certainly, with the almost all-consuming requirements of meeting Meaningful Use over the past several years, there's been little room for planning and executing a care team communication strategy.

So yes, as a whole, healthcare lags behind other industries in adopting readily available solutions. However, as healthcare organizations come up for air in a post-Meaningful Use era, it is clear that they are beginning to recognize the need to shift focus and address communication needs. Unfortunately, this delay has had negative effects for both caregivers and patients – just look at provider satisfaction and patient experience surveys.

But relief is at hand. Unbeknownst to many clinicians, there's now an array of proven technologies to improve healthcare communications dramatically and to reduce medical errors. When pulled together in a unified platform, these technologies offer impressive benefits, including:

- Reduced clinician alert and information fatigue;
- Increased patient involvement in their healing process;
- Improved HIPAA, HITECH and NIST 800-53 compliance; and
- Improved ability to access and intelligently share clinical data

Making Clinicians' Lives Easier

Technology-enabled features and enhancements have taken healthcare communications far beyond just texting. These new capabilities can greatly decrease stress and information overload for all care team members. Consider the following:

Fewer Communication Breakdowns through Issue Routing and Escalation

Predetermined issue routing and escalation, for example, means that new information goes only to care team members involved in a particular aspect of a patient's healthcare. Furthermore, escalation features fine-tune the process so that critical information can be automatically sent to backup and standby providers if not acknowledged or handled within an appropriate amount of time. Today, the risk of medical errors caused by losing critical patient-status communications, or by having messages fall through the cracks or get lost in the shuffle, can be vastly reduced with proper issue routing and escalation.

End of Juggling: One Device, One Platform

Today's single-source platforms negate the need for multiple communication devices such as SMS, pagers, faxes and phone calls. These platforms allow communication to be streamlined because they do so much more than just enabling secure, patient-centric messaging. With one app on one smartphone care team members can be equipped with the ability to update both clinical and patient assignments throughout a shift and while on-the-go. Data can be stored and distributed through a single database or throughout multiple clinical systems, depending on the scope and breadth of IT deployed by the healthcare organization. The message recipient can simply touch an icon on his or her device to confirm that the message reached its intended audience. This single device with automated distribution capability relieves clinicians of having to constantly carry multiple devices, and prevents them from having to second guess whether their message was sent to the right person via the right communication tool.

Cleaner Handoffs from Intelligent Clinical Summaries

Today we know that 37 percent of all patient handoffs are flawed or defective. The current gold standard for patient handoff is oral handoff at the bedside, using a mnemonic-based checklist (e.g. SBAR, i-PASS, etc.). Unfortunately, these checklists are fairly rigid and do not take into account patient or clinician context. Often, the checklists include more factors than are relevant to the patient. Not surprisingly, clinicians often do not stick to this process – leading to ongoing breakdowns in communication and making the sustainability of handoff best practices difficult.

With a single-source communications platform, your organization can seamlessly support handoff best practices via an Intelligent Clinical Summary, which can be accessed anytime, anywhere to support evidenced-based decision making. These summaries are dynamic, meaning they are updated every time new information is received, and they are tailored to show only clinically relevant information based on the patient status and the clinician's role. This real-time collaboration helps ensure patient handoffs always include every bit of relevant information, providing for a much more reliable process.

Cost and ROI

Escalating healthcare costs are of tremendous concern to administrators, patients and lawmakers alike. Pre- and post-interventional studies have demonstrated that an upgraded, single-source communications platform can drive savings for an organization by improving patient experience, length of stay, patient safety and information security risk. In addition to reducing clinician alert and information fatigue, the cost benefits of these new platforms are engaging even the most discerning healthcare CFOs.

What to Do Next

The best place to start is **within your own organization**. Ask when and where do breakdowns in communication commonly occur? Chat with care team members and administrators about communication-related issues such as patient handoff, urgent issue routing and escalation and current levels of alert and information fatigue. Pinpoint five to seven critical issues that need solving and confirm those with your team.

Next, **review some of the offered solutions** to see which one(s) could help solve your issues. Once you've narrowed down the list of vendors, engage your IT and finance teams to help determine next steps, including system compatibility and required ROI.

The next step is to **engage the vendors**, sharing what you believe to be your organization's clinical communication priorities and purchase criteria.

For a reasonably small investment of time, you will gain important knowledge that can help you reduce clinician fatigue and create an overall better-functioning organization for your providers and patients.

About the Author

James F. Baxter is CEO of Nashville-based MEDarchon, a leader in healthcare communications systems. His career includes a long tenure in healthcare technology management and consulting, CRO and clinical lab work with ClinTrials Research, Inc. and SmithKline Beechman Clinical Laboratories and managed care experience at American Medical Plan. Baxter is a graduate of Vanderbilt's Owen Graduate School of Management.