

A leap forward for patient experience: How 'smart' rooms are transforming communications, collaboration and connection

Delivering healthcare is becoming more complex. As health-at-home programs and outpatient procedures gain traction, communicating with patients across multiple care settings is growing in importance. At the same time, patient acuity continues to rise and inpatient volumes are [not projected to decrease](#) anytime soon.

Becker's Healthcare recently spoke with Heidi West, Head of Healthcare at Zoom, about how hospitals and health systems are deploying communication technology to improve the patient experience, relieve the pressure of labor shortages and improve collaboration among clinicians.

'Connected' rooms are critical for patient satisfaction + care efficiency

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the healthcare sector learned a great deal about the negative effects of isolation, especially in hospital settings. Virtual communication proved to be an effective way to deliver care more efficiently and better integrate families into patient care.

"Having a virtual footprint in patient rooms is table stakes for providers," Ms. West said. "If you don't have a way to engage with patients remotely, that means every person engaged in patient care must be at the hospital physically. In today's world of workforce shortages, that's not scalable."

The good news: routine parts of the care journey – like rounding, patient education, virtual nursing, discharge, social services engagement and post-discharge considerations – can now be handled through hospital patient engagement systems.

As hospitals and health systems develop virtual communication strategies, however, the patient experience must be a top priority, and unintended consequences can't be overlooked. One-way cameras, for example, can contribute to patient dissatisfaction.

Ms. West offered a personal example: her 82-year-old mother was recently in a hospital that used virtual nursing capabilities. In her mother's hospital room, on the ceiling, was a 360-degree, one-way camera.

"The camera startled my mother every time the virtual nurse connected and started talking to her out of nowhere," Ms. West said. "The nurse said, 'I can see you at all times,' which made my mother feel very uncomfortable. She felt she was being watched and that she had no control over her experience. The last thing you want is to make patients uncomfortable when you're trying to help them get better."

Effective virtual communication depends on an integrated technology strategy

Similarly, deploying multiple, virtual communication solutions – each with their own camera – can also negatively affect the patient experience.

"Zoom is looking at how to leverage one source for multiple virtual engagements," Ms. West said. "This eliminates the 'patient paparazzi' experience that occurs when people are surrounded by many different cameras in the hospital."

A unified communication strategy begins with secure integration in the electronic health record (EHR) that safeguards protected health information through a BAA that enables HIPAA compliance. At the same

time, virtual communication solutions must have open application programming interfaces (APIs) and a software development kit (SDK) so they can integrate with other healthcare applications like the EHR, the patient engagement system and third-party monitoring solutions used in patients' rooms.

"Zoom integrates with many different types of healthcare systems," Ms. West said. "That speaks to our respect for PHI and being HIPAA ready. We can feed all of the information from a Zoom session into the EHR and other systems for patient engagement, monitoring and diagnosis. Many times, we open our APIs and work directly with a health system's vendor to create an integrated solution."

System integration also contributes to ease of use and application adoption. From a provider perspective, Ms. West said, Zoom blends seamlessly into existing workflows. It's not a parallel solution that requires a separate login. The less toggling between systems that users have to do, the better.

"I think the reason Zoom had so much success during COVID is because it's simple, intuitive and easy to adopt. It just works," Ms. West said.





Such qualities are critical for patients' use and adoption of technology, too. Ms. West recalled when a partner organization provided hospitalized patients who couldn't have visitors during the pandemic with an iPad equipped with Zoom and a meeting ID so they could communicate with family and friends. "Seniors who didn't want to eat started having dinner over Zoom with their grandchildren," Ms. West said. "Or their children and grandchildren cheered them on while they were doing physical therapy. It helped improve the level of interaction and connection during that time."

Hospitals and health systems saw such improvements in patient outcomes with increased patient engagement, that many have continued to leverage Zoom to support their virtual communications. The application is integrated into many different patient engagement systems and even utilizes pillow speakers to provide enhanced patient experience, as well as to support virtual nursing.

By using existing cameras in the hospital setting, Zoom is also extending its application to support telesitting, which can help reduce fall and other risks. "We had healthcare clients creating their own telesitting solutions, asking if Zoom could help. This led us to leverage our partnership with Major League Baseball and their replay command center to create a standard approach for telesitting command centers that have multiple screens, which enable staff to engage with different patients," Ms. West said.

Remote patient engagement needs extend beyond the four walls of a hospital

Many healthcare organizations recognize they must meet patients where they are. In response, Zoom has developed partnerships with home health vendors, like TytoCare, as well as other remote patient monitoring solutions.

"Virtual is virtual, regardless of where the patient is," Ms. West said. "Chronic care, disease management and remote patient monitoring must travel to wherever the patient is located."

As with inpatient room technologies, the user experience – namely, simplicity – plays an important role in adoption of at-home technologies, which Zoom has internalized. "If you expect a patient at home to engage, the process has to be easy," Ms. West said. "If the first experience isn't positive, they won't try again. This is where Zoom shines."

When patients are discharged from the hospital with a medical device, for example, they may not know how to use it. With Zoom's Virtual Agent solution, patients can engage with a web-based chatbot, and if they need to connect with a human for further device support, the system can initiate a video call to a nurse who can help.

"I feel strongly that the patient room can be anywhere," she said. "In some cases, patients do not need to be physically in the hospital to receive the quality of care they require. Meeting patients where they are enables them to be at the helm of their care."

Virtual communication is the key to truly collaborative care

Integrating collaboration and communication tools into the healthcare experience is powerful. The COVID pandemic showed the value of collaboration across health systems, but organizations have just scratched the surface with regard to connecting doctors and nurses with their patients.

"Zoom knows healthcare is different," Ms. West said. "Serving healthcare is a top priority for Zoom, and we have dedicated teams in place so we can continue to deliver options that will empower patients and clinicians alike."

The opportunity to improve communications and collaboration across the healthcare ecosystem is what excites Ms. West the most. "We have the opportunity to profoundly improve the patient experience. That's a tremendous goal, and it's one we're determined to achieve."

