Podcast for Physician-led Systems Homework

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Geisinger Health System: A Leader in 21st Century Health Care
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Sandy Hausman: It's early in the 21st century but if you want to know where American medicine may be headed take a trip to north central Pennsylvania.

Background: Welcome to Geisinger how may I help you?

Sandy Hausman: Geisinger Health is a physician-led integrated system that cares for about 2.5 million patients, all of them connected to a state of the art electronic system.

Dr. Paulus: We were very early adopters of electronic health record technology beginning in 1995. If you came today to see any Geisinger physician anywhere in the Geisinger system they will have immediately available access to all of your important clinical information instantaneously.

Sandy Hausman: Dr. Ronald Paulus is chief Technology and Innovation Officer at Geisinger which employs more than 700 doctors at 55 different locations; three acute care medical centers and a children's hospital and oversees a health plan covering nearly 22,000 members. By studying millions of patient records in its electronic database Geisinger was able to clearly see patterns and problems that plague many medical organizations.

Dr. Paulus: The very serious questions about appropriateness of care, unjustified variation where different clinicians do different things for different reasons that aren't always obvious. Some of the perverse payment incentives that may actually reward lower quality care, for example, reimbursing a hospital more if a patient has a complication rather than paying more if they do well; fragmented care that lacks the necessary coordination for guiding a consumer across the health care continuum at various stages of their life.

Sandy Hausman: Geisinger's CEO and Board of Directors saw opportunities for improvement so they challenged the hospital to make changes in the way it did business. Administrators began by identifying the best possible outcome for patients, then worked backward to devise evidence based practices that would achieve those goals. Take diabetes for example.

Dr. Nungaser: We as the group decided to focus on nine parameters. If you yourself had diabetes you would want all of these things checked off, taken care of. The total number of diabetic patients that we had that had perfect care was a paltry two percent.

Sandy Hausman: That was also the national average but Geisingers' medical director, Dr. Raymond Nungeser, thought the organization could do better. Extensive laboratory testing became a routine part of every diabetic patient's care. Nurses were given a checklist for examining patients' feet,
an important way to monitor for nerve damage that can occur when diabetes is poorly managed. And during each visit patients got a report card, a way to assess their progress and encourage the lifestyle changes needed to prevent serious complications. Today, Nungeser says there's been a seven-fold increase in the number of patients getting perfect care and Geisinger is saving money. Both changes easily documented through the electronic record system.

Dr. Nungaser: Patients are experiencing lower complications than they used to, so if I'm taking perfect care of your diabetes hopefully you don't need to see my retinal surgeon for a problem with your eyes. Hopefully you don't need to see my nephrologist for kidney failure. Hopefully you don't need to see my orthopedic surgeon to have your toes amputated.

Sandy Hausman: Patients who have multiple medical problems like diabetes, high blood pressure, and cardiovascular disease are monitored more closely by nurses known as embedded care managers. They assure that medication is being taken, that patients have appropriate tests and doctor visits, and that they're doing well.

Dr. Paulus: We know that more and more commonly individuals have 2, 3, 4, 5 chronic diseases. Patients with 3 or more chronic diseases comprise 80 percent of the total spending in the health care system; their quality of life and ability to be productive citizens in their jobs and for their families is at risk.

Sandy Hausman: And for those that must undergo heart bypass surgery, Geisinger offered a bold new approach, a guarantee of sorts. It would charge a flat fee for the cost of surgery and ninety days of follow-up care.

Dr. Paulus: All the doctor fees, all the hospital fees, all the specialist fees, all the consultant fees, all the drug fees, everything is included in that one price and should something go wrong, and we're pretty good at doing this, but should something go wrong, nobody has to pay anything incremental for a complication or a readmission, this is what was labeled the so-called warranty by the New York Times.

Sandy Hausman: This approach, called proven care, is controversial but it's proven a win for patients and for Geisinger's health plan, the only insurance company that's accepted the systems offer of performance based compensation. Geisinger credits a list of forty things the cardiac care team must do for each bypass patient, measures based on best practices and clinical research. Among other things, everyone gets antibiotics at a specific time before surgery and beta blockers to reduce complications afterward. The system has also developed a list of preventive measures that it hopes will improve the health of all adult patients, and a systematic approach to caring for people having hip replacement surgery. Those uniform practices aside, Dr. Paulus sites to other factors that have made Geisinger successful in its quest to improve quality of care. First he says, the hospital's board and CEO were willing to take a risk to support true innovation. Second, they spent money needed to make it happen.

Dr. Paulus: Although our physicians are salaried, each practice continues to be reimbursed on a fee-for-service basis for patient visits, so that incentivizes more care and the health plan also pays stipends both to the physician and to the practice to support and enable the transition from the sort of current state of primary care to this proven home model.

Sandy Hausman: The health plan pays about $1,800 per month per physician for this enhanced form of care and gives each practice $5,000 per every 1,000 Medicare members to help pay for additional staff
to support extended hours and invest in new technology. Once again, money is saved because patients are healthier.

Dr. Paulus: We've had pretty dramatic results. We've seen about a twenty percent reduction in all-cause admissions. We've seen a significant reduction in readmissions, which are both financially and clinically bad and we've seen about a seven percent total medical cost savings on a per member per month basis. This is an example of a win-win-win where patients we believe are receiving concierge medicine, if you will, without having to pay an extra fee, they're getting good reliable care from people who live and work in their communities and whom they trust the health system at large is saving dollars and in fact in the first year alone the health plan came out ahead.

Sandy Hausman: And Medical Director Nungeser says productivity remains high even with the introduction of new record keeping requirements. He says physicians and nurses quickly get up to speed on the electronic system that makes all this possible.

Dr. Nungeser: I have a new family practitioner upstairs right now that is now in her fourth day of employment and she's seeing patients on what I call a ramped up schedule and within two weeks I bet I have her up to full steam. We don’t expect them to be productive on day one. We know that it takes awhile to orient themselves to this new tool and we give them the support that they need to become productive not only during those first two weeks but afterwards. Our IT team and our electronic health record team is always there as a background and support.

Sandy Hausman: One other important element of the Geisinger experience, patients are an important part of their own care. Rather than present themselves at a window before each appointment they're expected to register themselves by swiping their credit card or driver's license on arrival at the doctor's office.

Dr. Nungeser: The eighty year olds are using it.

Sandy Hausman: From home they can check their own medical records online, see test results, make appointments and if the personal touch is needed, make a phone call.

Dr. Paulus: Every patient is assigned a personal health navigator who 24/7, 365 days a year, they can reach out by phone and get access to a real human being who can answer or direct them to have answered any question that they might have, whether it's about their benefit, their medicine, a symptom that they're having and we're piloting this program in a number of clinic sites, it started with two and now we're up to twelve and we're applying this to all of our Medicare patients in those sites currently.

Sandy Hausman: Dr. Paulus admits there is still some room for improvement but he says success breeds success, with more patients and talented health care professionals drawn to a medical system that is increasingly seen as a leader in providing quality 21st century care. For more information visit our website at commonwealth.org where Dr. Paulus, Commonwealth Fund President Karen Davis who sits on Geisinger’s Board of Director’s, and the medical system’s CEO, Glen Steele, discuss the Geisinger approach.