



Media Contact: Kate Prout, 215-348-2691, ProutKF@aetna.com

National Patient Safety Awareness Week Shines Spotlight on Importance of Consumers Taking an Active Role in Their Health Care

By Kyra Bobinet, M.D., M.P.H., Aetna's Medical Director for Health and Wellness Innovation



Kyra Bobinet, M.D., M.P.H

Consider this: 195,000 people die each year from preventable medical errors.¹ But, studies show clear and open communication between patients and their physicians can go a long way toward reducing the number of medical mistakes.

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National Patient Safety Awareness Week is taking place from March 7th to the 13th. This year's theme is all about healthy communication between patients and their physicians. The simple theme *Let's Talk: Healthy Conversations for Safer Healthcare* is aimed at helping people become more involved in their own health care.

So, how can consumers get proactive about their health? The number one way is by becoming more informed about their health and being a part of every decision that's made about their health care. The following tips provide simple ways to open up the lines of communication with physicians, leading to better quality, safer health care. Read on for more tips:

- 1) Get organized – it is critically important for consumers to keep a record of the medications they are taking, any allergies they may have or conditions they are managing. When physicians have the full picture of a person's health, they can work with them to make better decisions about prescription drugs or treatment options. Many health plans, including Aetna, now offer personal health records (PHR) to help people organize their health information. Consumers can share their PHRs with physicians online, leading to more productive visits at the doctors' office. To learn more about Aetna's PHR, visit: www.aetna.com/showcase
- 2) Get smart – people can learn about their condition or treatment program by asking their doctor or nurse for information or by researching information from credible sources such as [Aetna IntelliHealth](http://www.aetna.com/intelihealth), Aetna's consumer health information website reviewed by Harvard Medical School physicians. Research shows that people who understand their treatment program get better results.
- 3) Get assertive – consumers should speak up if they have a question. Many people benefit from taking along a friend or family member to a doctors' appointment. The Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality provides the following list of questions for consumers to ask when they receive a prescription:
 - What is the medicine for?
 - How am I supposed to take it and for how long?
 - What side effects are likely? What do I do if they occur?
 - Is this medicine safe to take with other medicines or dietary supplements I am taking?
 - What food, drink, or activities should I avoid while taking this medicine?

More Tips:

To read more tips for preventing medical errors, please visit: <http://www.ahrq.gov/CONSUMER/20tips.htm>.

¹ Health Grades, 2004

Aetna Study Shows PHR Usage Connected to Safer, Higher Quality Health Care

A study of consumers who actively use a PHR underscores the fact that people who are involved in their own health care see better results.

Aetna's PHR contains information gathered from across the health care spectrum – such as physician offices, labs, diagnostic treatments and pharmacies. That information is combined with user-entered information such as family health history, over-the-counter medications or allergies. All of this information is continuously scanned by patented technology called the CareEngine to identify potential gaps in care. Members can access their information and share it with their physicians through Aetna's secure member website.

The Aetna study looked at people who used their PHR at least four times and found that PHR users:

- Received 57 percent more Care Considerations, which are alerts sent to members and physicians when the CareEngine identifies a gap in care, compared to non PHR users; and
- Resolved 68 percent more Care Considerations than non PHR users.

The study also found that Care Considerations generated by self-reported information are six times higher for PHR users compared to the non-user group. This shows that members who use their PHR are receiving more information about the ways they can work with their physicians to improve their health.

Three Ways a PHR Fosters Safer, Higher Quality Health Care

1.) More information leads to better care. Not only does the PHR have members' claims data automatically loaded into it, but members can also add information such as family history, over-the-counter medicines and allergies. This health information is available to members online. Members have the option of sharing it with their physicians leading to more productive visits at the doctors' office.

2.) Keeping track of prescriptions and doctors' visits keeps people on track for better health. The more information that is available, the more likely people are to follow their physicians' advice, such as finishing antibiotics or sticking to a recommended diet. Plus, people who regularly use a PHR may also save money. If doctors know about previous tests and lab results, they can avoid unnecessary or duplicate tests. More importantly, they can provide better care, since information like past medications and allergies is available through the PHR.

3) Access to personal health information anywhere, anytime. A PHR can be helpful to people when they are away from home – whether they are traveling around the globe or displaced from home after a natural disaster. With a PHR, patients' health information is available online for them and their doctors 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

Did You Know...?

- Approximately 1.3 million people are injured annually in the United States following so-called "medication errors." (Health Grades, 2004)
- The Institute of Medicine estimates that medical errors cost the U.S. approximately \$37.6 billion each year and about \$17 billion of those costs are associated with preventable errors.
- The RAND Institute estimates that health information technology could save the U.S. health care system approximately \$100 billion over 10 years by digitizing patient health records and housing them in a central online location.

Website of the Month

For more information about National Patient Safety Awareness Week, visit their website at:

<http://www.npsf.org/hp/psaw/>.

Product Corner: Spotlight on Aetna's Flexible Spending Accounts

Millions of Americans enroll in health care Flexible Spending Accounts (FSA) to put aside pretax dollars to pay for eligible out of pocket health care expenses. But a surprising amount of people don't spend all of the money by the end of the year. If the money isn't used, employers can't give it back.

But there is good news – the Internal Revenue Service (IRS) allows employers to give employees a grace period of up to two and a half months from the end of the FSA plan year – for plans ending December 31, 2009, they may have until March 15, 2010 – to spend unused money in their FSAs. In addition, most employers allow employees 90 days after the end of the plan year to submit receipts for costs incurred in the previous year.

Health care FSAs can be used for copays and deductibles, dental work, hearing aids, laboratory fees and prescription drugs. In addition, the IRS allows FSA funds to be used for:

1. Orthodontia
2. Chiropractic treatments
3. Acupuncture and physical therapy
4. Mental health counseling sessions
5. Over-the-counter items like pain relievers, antacids and sunscreen (SPF 30 or higher)
6. Vaporizers and thermometers
7. Prescription eyeglasses and sunglasses, contact lenses and contact lens solution
8. Mileage and travel expenses for a doctors visit or hospital stay
9. Fertility treatments
10. Childbirth classes

To learn more about FSAs and or to find more generally-eligible expenses visit Aetna's FSA website at www.aetnafsa.com.

Or visit Plan for Your Health, a public education campaign from Aetna and the Financial Planning Association <http://www.planforyourhealth.com/family/flexspend/>.