
New Tools Empower Patients to Make Decisions*Group Health Cooperative, Seattle, Washington*

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Studies show that if patients are given information about all of the options available to treat their condition in a palatable manner, they are much happier with their medical decision and the outcome. Patients also tend to choose less aggressive treatments. This can improve patient safety and health outcomes while bringing down the cost of care. At any given time, between 20,000 and 30,000 Group Health patients are considering a preference-sensitive procedure. To assist their patients and doctors in making treatment decisions, the health system uses tools such as videos to involve and inform their patients.

New Tools Empower Patients to Make Decisions, by Michael Soman, MD, April 19, 2010

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Sometimes science does not have all the answers. Treatments for conditions from back pain to breast cancer sometimes involve weighing different options with pros and cons for each. Often these treatment decisions are best determined by the patient's preference as she weighs the impact on her life of surgery, pain, and daily functioning.

At Group Health we have identified a list of preference-sensitive conditions and have begun a more formalized approach to involving the patient in these treatment decisions. Part of experience for patients is watching a carefully balanced video presentation developed with scientific rigor by the Foundation for Informed Medical Decision Making. In a video for cardiology, a patient learns the pros and cons of getting angioplasty. In general surgery, another video educates breast cancer patients about the differences in lumpectomy versus mastectomy.

Patients are encouraged and given time to fully discuss all of their questions and concerns with their doctor. It is a decision made together – shared between patient and doctor. This, unfortunately, is a very different experience in many doctors' offices and hospitals across the country where patients can feel rushed and under some pressure to follow the doctor's orders. Although most doctors mean well, surgeons tend to promote the treatment that they feel they do well – and that supports their business.

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less aggressive treatments. This can improve patient safety and health outcomes while bringing down the cost of care.

At any given time, between 20,000 and 30,000 Group Health members are considering a preference-sensitive procedure. Researcher David Arterburn from the Group Health Research Institute is carefully tracking the results of this program, looking at improvements in the patient experience as well as whether the process reduces the number of more aggressive treatments.

We don't whether these new tools will reduce costs at Group Health. But we know from our experience at Group Health that ensuring patients are fully informed and involved in decisions about their care is worth the investment of materials and time.

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