



3-minute case study: Patients helping patients

By Olivia Rybolt | September 12, 2017

What innovations drive success in healthcare?
Here's a tactic from a leading health system.

The problem

Virginia Mason Health System promises its community in Seattle that “better never stops.” As part of that promise, it invites feedback from patients and families, including opportunities to attend “professional innovation” meetings to share their experiences and inform the improvement work.

In 2014, hip replacement patient Nik Quesnell attended an innovation re-design session to surface a problem he found with his care: “Even though both of my experiences there were very, very favorable, the one thing that I didn’t get was the opportunity to talk to somebody who had been through the procedure.”

The solution

Ann Hagensen, RN, Virginia Mason’s project manager of patient relations and service, recognized the validity of Quesnell’s complaint. So, in 2015, she and her team worked with patients to co-design the

orthopedics Peer Partners program to provide peer-to-peer support and guidance to patients before and after their surgical procedures.

Here’s how it works: Former patients volunteer to become “peer partners” who round on the orthopedics floor, visiting current patients as well as attending weekly classes with orthopedic professionals to reinforce the knee and hip pre-surgical protocols from the experience of having a joint replacement surgery.

Peer partners undergo HIPAA and communication training as part of the orientation process. They meet with other volunteers, nurses, care technicians, work flow coordinators, and physical and occupational therapists for a 360-degree orientation to orthopedic patient care. The thorough training both prepares them and eases providers’ worries about lay volunteers speaking with their patients.

When trained, peer partners begin rounding to introduce themselves to patients scheduled for or recovering from knee, hip or shoulder replacements. They ask them how they are feeling and talk about what they can expect during recovery. Both pre- and post-operative patients welcome a chance to ask other patients about their own experiences.

“It’s about decreasing people’s anxiety, helping them to realize that they can continue and move through [recovery], and creating confidence that they’re in good hands,” says Hagensen. “The nursing staff and the orthopedic occupational therapy and physical therapy team are really appreciative of peer partners, knowing that patients are being visited and their anxieties are going down.”

The outcome

When asked if peer partners are helpful, patients have an “overwhelming response,” says Hagensen. Their positive experiences have led to multiple “volunteers from the bed” – recovered patients who return to the hospital as volunteers. Quesnell was one: “It’s definitely a win-win,” he says, “and I feel like I get my share of the wins.”

Now ten peer partners in orthopedics and three in otolaryngology regularly round on surgical floors to offer support and guidance to patients. They join a network of more than 400 other volunteers who donate their time and talents in many ways that provide meaning and purpose for everyone involved. Next, the Virginia Mason Peer Partners program will expand to the transplant and urology departments.

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Artwork by Molly Ferguson.



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