



# 3-minute case study: Getting patients on the portal

By Erin Graham | May 16, 2017

**W**hat innovations drive success in healthcare? Here's a tactic from a high performer on the athenahealth network.

## The problem

To improve communication with patients, Austin Area Obstetrics, Gynecology, and Fertility needed more patients to engage with its patient portal. In addition, Jinous Rouhani, CEO of the 22-provider group, wanted to fully realize the clinical and financial benefits of high portal adoption rates, which range from faster collection rates to improved outcomes.

To do so, Rouhani needed to get patients to register on the portal, and then to regularly use the technology.

## The solution

Rouhani found six used laptops that her staff no longer needed and placed them in the waiting area of the practice, along with privacy screens to create kiosks where patients could register

for the portal on the designated computers. Five front desk staff members were assigned to provide hands-on assistance.

"The key is make patients comfortable," Rouhani says. "Our employees literally walk them through step-by-step, showing them how easy it is."

Similar to other high performers, Rouhani also made portal use mandatory for patients. Her schedulers explain to patients that they will need to check in for their appointments on the portal at home. If patients arrive without having checked in, they are guided to one of the kiosks to do so, rather than checking in at the front desk.

Changing patient behavior has also meant changing operations for the staff, including setting clear expectations for customer service via the portal. The practice set a rule that patients' messages via the portal must be answered within two days.

## The outcome

With clear protocols and mandatory adoption, Austin Area OB-GYN, a high performer on key quality

metrics across the athenahealth network, achieved a patient portal adoption rate of 93 percent. In addition, the practice's patient pay yield is among the top 5 percent of all practices on the athenahealth network. Rouhani attributes that success, in part, to the way the portal has automated back office functions, such as notifying patients of past-due balances.

The portal also notifies patients of upcoming appointments and lab results. And Rouhani says asking patients to enter their own data has improved the accuracy of their stored information. Previously, Austin Area OB-GYN's patient data had an error rate of 8 percent.

"When we asked patients to do that, our error rate went below 1 percent," says Rouhani. "The patient portal could be your biggest asset, if you treat it as such."

*Erin Graham is a writer based in Boston.*



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