AI in Patient Support Services: Five Early Learnings

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While digital technologies have reshaped many industries, healthcare is one of the last to rely on faxes and phone calls. This holds true for workflows in physician offices and hospitals, which are heavily reliant on legacy technologies. Patient support services programs operate as the bridge between these workflows and newer innovations to speed patient access to therapy.

For over a year, IQVIA has deployed artificial intelligence (AI) to support multiple clients on patient support programs of all sizes. Through these experiences, we are gathering valuable insights about what works, what doesn't, and how AI might help us all fundamentally transform the operation of patient services. In this article, we share five early learnings that we hope will inform and inspire colleagues working in the patient support services environment.

Expect some resistance to change.

As humans, we often find comfort in what's familiar and resist anything new. Patient support agents are no different.

When we trained agents on AI-powered capabilities, they expressed excitement about how these innovations could improve their work. But after implementing new features, we discovered that agents were not necessarily adopting them.

For example, our Patient Relationship Management platform transcribes and summarizes calls in real time—a capability that you might assume would eliminate the need for manual notes in the record. Yet we observed agents continuing to type up their own summaries. When we inquired about why, they explained simply, "I still want to do it" or "I want it in my own words."

We found that it takes time to build agents' trust in AI-generated output. It also requires education that the summaries are from the agent's own transcription. Ongoing reinforcement and deployment of change management principles are critical pieces to drive greater uptake of more efficient AI-powered workflows.

AI is a gateway to greater personalization.

Cell and gene treatments and other targeted therapies underscore a fundamental shift in scientific discovery and healthcare innovation. The ability to engage in treatments at the individual level brings hope to new patients who were previously unserved.

In this environment, it's not just the treatments that need to be tailored; it's also the patient support service to resolve access challenges. We're finding AI to be an essential tool when shifting from "one-size-fits-all" approaches to services designed and delivered around specific needs and barriers.

For example, AI can help in connecting and processing data from disparate systems and point solutions. This helps us say goodbye to the "swivel chair." Instead of spending time constantly shifting from system to system, our team operates with a single view of the patient. This unified technology perspective helps to elevate the accuracy of adverse event reporting while also enabling more meaningful patient engagement. Ultimately, it helps our agents to identify and deliver the right information and service at the right time to solve the patient's unique challenge with a high degree of precision and quality.

Embrace opportunities to evolve metrics.

Although patient support agents deliver a highly specialized service, program performance is measured by antiquated call center metrics. Examples of the commonly used metrics are call abandonment rates and average speed to answer.

Our experience in using AI-powered sentiment analysis demonstrates the potential to revise program metrics to reflect meaningful patient support outcomes. IQVIA's analysis suggests that people often don't mind waiting—as long as their time is rewarded with complete and accurate answers to their questions. The takeaway? One-call resolution might be a more meaningful metric than speed to answer.

We believe that the wealth of data generated by sentiment analysis and AI-powered patient services will emerge as a hugely valuable tool for developing more nuanced performance metrics. This trove of data is an important prerequisite for going well beyond call center metrics to truly understand—and continually improve—patient experience.
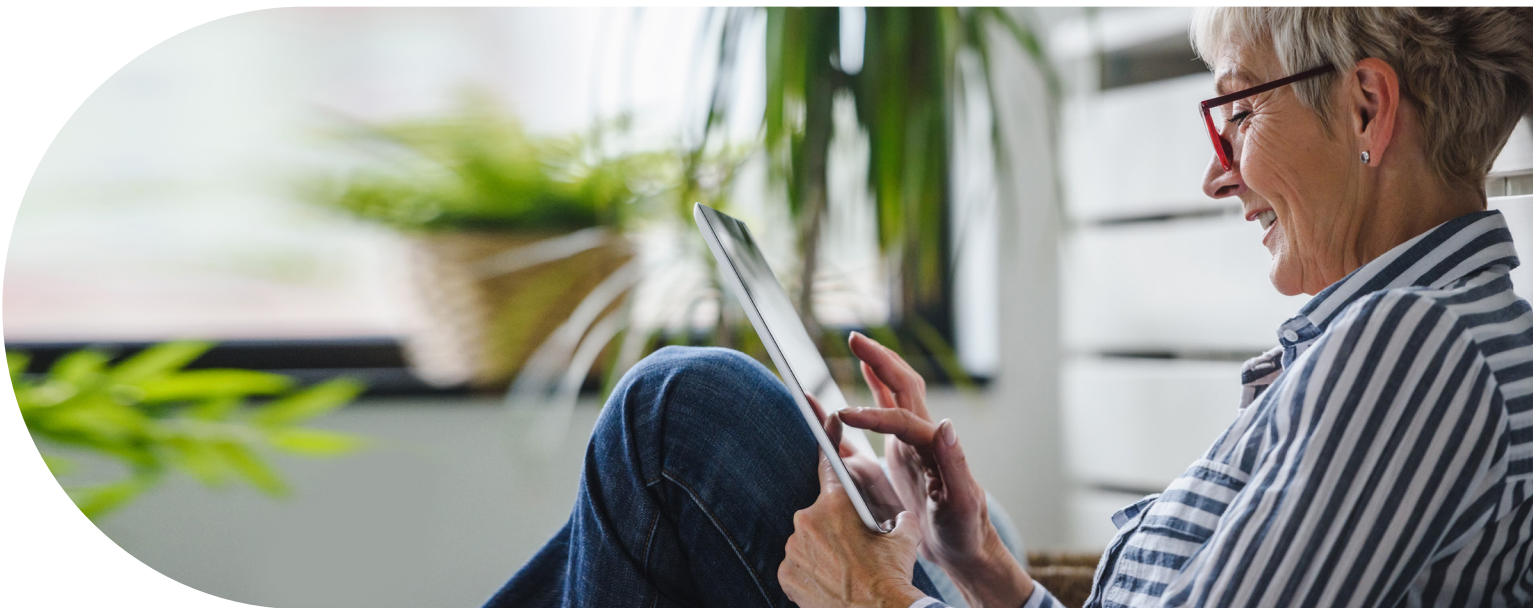
AI enables improved quality and compliance.

For over 30 years, patient support programs have extracted small samples of patient interactions to audit quality and compliance. AI will dramatically change the game—making it feasible to analyze 100% of patient interactions. With this comprehensive approach, we're finding it much easier to systematically identify compliance risks along with training and process improvement opportunities.

Additionally, AI-powered "smart assist" capabilities can serve up relevant reference materials and scripts during patient interactions. For example, if a caller mentions a key term or describes a specific situation, the system can automatically provide the agent with the most relevant and program-compliant information. By eliminating the need to place callers on hold to search for answers on hard drives, desktop folders, and sticky notes, "smart assist" improves the patient experience while ensuring consistent adherence to program guidelines and requirements.

There's much more to learn.

IQVIA recently convened a patient advisory board whose members emphasized "words matter in patient support." Using AI, we've been able to quantifiably demonstrate their impact. For instance, saying "rejected" typically generates negative sentiment, while using the word "expedite" tends to elicit positive responses. While obvious, the ability to see sentiment change and course-correct in real time helps to refine a program's call scripts, training materials, and coaching tactics to better engage the patient.

Looking ahead

Therapies are becoming more targeted. Patient needs are increasing in complexity. Our experience over the past year demonstrates that AI is essential to delivering truly personalized support and elevating patient support program offerings. At IQVIA, we're energized by our successes to date. As we continue to expand and refine how we're using AI, we will always do so with a focus on enhancing the human element that is the heart of effective patient support.

Connect with us to learn how IQVIA's Patient Support team can help you leverage AI and other technologies to improve patient outcomes.

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