

eConsultSD: Connecting Primary Care and Specialty Care Physicians

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Have you ever been involved in a game of “phone tag” with someone? If so, you know the feeling of healthcare providers everywhere who struggle to connect with busy specialty care physicians to discuss a patient’s care.

This communication is particularly challenging for the primary care physicians (PCPs) at over eighty (80) community clinics in San Diego

County who have little to no access to specialty care for their patients. These clinics are an integral part of the healthcare system in San Diego County, as they provide primary care for those who are uninsured or on public assistance programs such as Medi-Cal or County Medical Services. Historically, these PCPs have been forced to rely on inefficient systems, such as handwritten forms, faxes and phone calls, to coordinate specialty care referrals when they are available. To exacerbate the issue, they are now faced with a rapidly diminishing network of specialty care physicians who are willing to see the medically underserved due to poor reimbursement from various payers.

Community clinic PCPs frequently make specialty referrals for issues they could handle at the clinic level if they had the input of a specialist. To facilitate this communication, the San Diego County Medical Society Foundation (SDCMSF), in partnership with the Council of Community Clinics, introduced eConsultSD to the local community in January 2011. With funding from Kaiser Permanente and Blue

Shield of California Foundation, SDCMSF leveraged the success of Orange County’s eConsult model. eConsultSD allows PCPs to engage in a “curbside consultation” with a variety of appropriate specialists via a HIPAA-compliant, web-based portal where they can articulate a clinical question and share relevant patient information. On average, specialists respond to the PCP in two or three days, as compared to the typical six to eight weeks for a face-to-face specialty care visit. eConsultSD eliminates several challenges for the patient, including expensive cost, lack of transportation, language barriers at the specialist’s office, and intimidation in seeing a specialist outside of their community clinic. eConsultSD also resolves a significant challenge for PCPs who are expected to have a moderate amount of specialty care knowledge due to increased patient complexity. Through an eConsult, PCPs receive the tools they need to stay informed on specialty care topics, while also maximizing the most cost effective care setting – the medical home. Indeed, eConsults enhance the clinic as a medical home by bringing a virtual special-

ist into the multifunctional medical care team.

Both PCPs and patients are extremely grateful for eConsultSD. One PCP from La Maestra Community Health Center said, “Many of my patients refuse referral to specialty care due to problems with a language barrier (I have translation in the office, the specialist does not), childcare issues, financial issues, and lack of transportation. Even when I advise them that I am not a specialist and their health may suffer without specialty consultation, they often refuse. The ability to do an eConsult with specialists definitely enhances my ability to care for these patients. eConsult was extremely helpful. I had a morbidly obese, wheelchair-bound, Medi-Cal patient who really needed the input of an endocrinologist but had no means or motivation to make the trip. The endocrinologist was extremely helpful in outlining a treatment plan for this complicated diabetic patient [without her having to make the trip to her office].”

Perhaps the most notable accomplishment of the eConsultSD system is the broad network of volunteer specialist care physicians that is available to support community clinic PCPs. Currently, the system offers 11 different specialties, including dermatology, adult and pediatric endocrinology, gastroenterology, gynecology, hematology, hepatology, pain management, orthopaedic surgery, radiology, and rheumatology. eConsults benefit these specialists as well, by giving them the opportunity to train PCPs on cases they may consider routine, thus freeing up their time for more complex, appropriate referrals. They also have an appropriate tool for conveying to the PCPs what they expect in terms of clinical referral guidelines and protocols for referring. eConsults significantly lower costs by reducing inappropriate referrals, streamlining referrals, and preventing the patient’s condition from worsening while waiting months for a face-to-face visit. The benefits of instituting an eConsult system are thus enormous for physi-

cians, patients, employers and payers.

SDCMSF is working with local payers to develop a payment methodology for the specialty care physicians contributing to eConsultSD. SDCMSF is happy to share best practices and lessons learned with other coalitions that are interested in implementing eConsults. For more information, please contact Lauren Banfe at Lauren.Banfe@SDCMS.org.

Lauren Banfe, Resource Development Director at the San Diego County Medical Society Foundation (SDCMSF), is the project director for eConsultSD. SDCMSF is a nonprofit organization, whose mission is to improve community health, access to care for all, and wellness for patients and physicians through engaged volunteerism. Ms. Banfe received her MA in Applied Developmental and Educational Psychology at Boston College and her BA from Loyola University in Maryland. Ms. Banfe has worked in the nonprofit industry since 2006.

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