WEBINAR RECAP

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HOW THE AFFORDABLE CARE ACT CHALLENGES PATIENT-PHYSICIAN COMMUNICATION

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One major goal of the Affordable Care Act (ACA) is to change the way healthcare systems are incentivized. Currently, doctors and hospitals are paid for procedures and tests, and the ACA aims to shift this focus to outcomes. The theory motivating the shift is that a combination of the right incentives and timely data will lead to better decisions and lower costs.

Whether these incentives lead to changes in behavior that will generate improved outcomes is the $64,000 question. The answer will be impacted by a number of factors at the patient and physician level. The theories underlying the ACA do not take into account some of the unique challenges faced by physicians and patients. Some factors that may impact how physicians respond to outcome-based care include:

- Pay-for-performance has been well-tested in the last decade, but the jury is still out on how much it improves quality
- Competition from nurses, who have a different and competing view with regard to their role in patient care
- Time and technology pressures are a distraction from patient-centered care
- Specialists are grappling with income declines resulting from ACO-type arrangements
- As more importance is placed on obtaining quality metrics, physicians might develop measurement fatigue

To ensure that doctors and patients are reaching a better and more efficient level of communications, we also have to understand health reform from the patient’s perspective. In the last few years, the emphasis has shifted from the physician as the center of the healthcare universe to encourage patients and physicians to work together in finding solutions and improving outcomes. But there are certain barriers to this:

- The fear of being categorized as “difficult” may prevent patients from participating in their own health care decisions
- There exist underlying barriers to patients taking costs into account
- Patients’ and physicians’ perception and assessment of risks and benefits may not align
- Patients may exhibit skepticism about physician’s motives

Additionally, the former patient-physician dynamic involved providers persuading patients that more is better (a natural progression in a fee-for-service system), and now they are trying to convince patients that more is less, presenting a new level of communications challenges. By recognizing the very real communications challenges that lie ahead for patients and providers, healthcare reform can open the door for candid and realistic conversations about overcoming these challenges.