



HOW PARTNERSHIP HEALTH PLAN OF CALIFORNIA IMPROVED ITS HEALTHCARE SCORES

BACKGROUND

In 2006, VSP® Vision Care began sharing HIPAA-compliant vision exam data with Partnership Health Plan of California (PHC) through the VSP Eye Health Management Program®. Since every VSP WellVision Exam® includes a diabetic retinal exam and glaucoma screening, PHC leveraged the exam data to improve their NCQA HEDIS® Scores.

According to Performance Improvement and Decision Support Supervisor Trina Buehrer-Salas at PHC, the VSP program “resulted almost immediately in a 6% improvement in our HEDIS scores, as related to care of chronic diabetes patients. And that is tangible evidence that HEDIS Scores can be improved significantly, with resulting ROI, through the VSP Eye Health Management Program.”

To build on this success, in 2007 VSP began sending its members identified with diabetes an exam reminder letter if they hadn't received an eye exam in 14 months. This service was performed at no cost to PHC, which further supported the PHC HEDIS improvement strategy.

NEXT GENERATION IMPROVEMENT

In 2009, Buehrer-Salas and her department of five team members were looking for ways to improve the quality of healthcare services to their members with chronic health conditions, such as diabetes, hypertension, and glaucoma.

The PHC team was also interested in improving their performance measurement scores for service to these “chronic” patients. Those evaluations include NCQA's authoritative HEDIS Scores, along with similar quality-of-care and service scores produced by the Medicare Five Star federal rating system.

Taken together, the scores are an important measure of how well health plans are caring for their members. They also help determine reimbursement rates for some types of healthcare services. For that reason, achieving better scores can result in “double ROI” for plans that meet this challenge. The ROI is doubled because it comes from both the reduced medical costs that flow from high-quality care of chronic patients and from the increased reimbursements.

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PHC has long been interested in improving chronic care and the scores it receives for providing that care.

A rapidly growing, county-based health insurance plan aimed mostly at Medicare and Medi-Cal (the California version of Medicaid) patients, PHC was established in 1994 as a way to provide access to healthcare for underserved patient populations and especially older and indigent patients. PHC now operates as a public-private business entity in California's Solano, Napa, Yolo, Sonoma, Marin, and Mendocino counties.

Since its founding 16 years ago, the plan has expanded to its current enrollment of approximately 200,000 members.

Along with the surge in enrollment, however, came a difficult problem: figuring out how to provide excellent healthcare services to the growing number of patients who were struggling with chronic—and often age-related—conditions such as obesity, diabetes, hypertension, and glaucoma.

Because these chronic health issues can destroy quality of life and lead to crippling disability, identifying patients in the early stages of developing chronic ailments is crucial. Early identification, followed by effective management of these conditions can dramatically improve health outcomes for patients. It also provides significant ROI gains for health insurers by greatly reducing the costs of long-term care.

For Buehrer-Salas, an 11-year veteran of the Quality Improvement department at PHC, the challenge of identifying and effectively managing chronic patients is a priority. Although the results were encouraging, by 2009, Buehrer-Salas and her team hadn't achieved the quality-of-care improvement goals, nor the improvement in HEDIS and Five Star scores that they were hoping for. "We're always looking for ways to improve both our care and our scores," says Buehrer-Salas, "but identifying and managing chronic patients is often difficult, and we needed to get better at it."

In early 2009, Buehrer-Salas and her team were introduced to the VSP Eye Health Management Program, in which health plan members receive cost-effective annual eye exams that include tests to identify plan members with chronic conditions such as diabetes, hypertension, diabetic retinopathy, high cholesterol, age-related macular degeneration and glaucoma. Signs of these conditions are often first detected during regular eye checkups.

The VSP program carefully observes all HIPAA privacy regulations when it provides medical claim data to health plans to help identify chronic patients who could benefit from disease management and/or wellness programs. The VSP program also follows patients with diabetes through the years, monitoring their health through yearly eye exams and sending them reminder letters if they've gone beyond their eligibility.

By identifying and following patients (at no additional cost), the VSP Eye Health Management Program makes it much easier for the health plan to monitor chronic conditions over time—resulting in better care, better rating scores, and significantly "doubling ROI."

VSP Eye Health Management Program

The VSP Eye Health Management Program delivers unique value by detecting—and then helping manage—chronic health conditions among VSP members. Through this proprietary program, VSP eye doctors report patients whose yearly eye exams detect signs of serious chronic conditions. After being identified, patients are monitored in yearly eye exams, and can also receive education and coaching from disease-management specialists. This carefully controlled and HIPAA-compliant system results in much better management of chronic health conditions among VSP members.

THE PROCESS

The PHC-VSP system for identifying chronic health conditions through cost-effective annual eye exams—and then monitoring and managing them effectively—was simple and easy to implement.

During the yearly exams, the long-established network of VSP independent eye doctors looks carefully for telltale signs of serious chronic health conditions: diabetes, hypertension, high cholesterol, diabetic retinopathy, glaucoma, and age-related macular degeneration. When patients with one or more of these conditions are identified (or when the already-known chronic conditions appear to be deteriorating), VSP quickly relays the information to PHC's quality improvement team.

Once identified, the chronic patients are carefully monitored and managed by PHC's care coordination team and providers. VSP also has an efficient system of "checking back" periodically via specially targeted reminder letters with PHC members who've been identified as chronic patients, in order to make sure they get their eye exams each year.

The new PHC-VSP partnership has produced some very encouraging improvements so far. "The VSP Eye Health Management Program doesn't cost us anything, and it's very easy to operate," says Buehrer-Salas. "Our plan members don't even need a VSP ID card—all they have to do to schedule their next eye exam is go online and sign up."

"The reminder letters are huge. When I saw that VSP was basically offering us a free 'intervention,' in which they would send reminder letters out to thousands of our members with chronic health conditions, I jumped at it!"

THE RESULTS

After only 18 months of operation, the PHC-VSP Eye Health Management partnership produced a significant improvement in both the quality of care for PHC members with chronic health conditions and the HEDIS and Five Star scores that measure the quality of this care.

In 2010, VSP sent out more than 6,000 reminder letters designed to motivate PHC members with diabetes who needed a yearly eye exam to schedule one.

In addition to sending out the reminder letters (which typically enjoy a success rate of about 22%), VSP doctors identified diabetes in 108 plan members who were unknown by PHC as having the disease.

"That intervention by VSP—the reminder letters, I mean—resulted in 1,200 of our members with chronic diabetes getting an eye exam that they might have otherwise missed. That's huge."

– Trina Buehrer-Salas
Performance Improvement Supervisor
Partnership Health Plan of California

“The bottom line is very simple,” says Trina Buehrer-Salas. “That intervention by VSP—the reminder letters, I mean—resulted in 1,200 of our members with chronic diabetes getting an eye exam that they might have otherwise missed. That’s huge. And when you add in the 108 members who were identified as having diabetes ... well, that’s also very significant, in terms of improving quality of care.”

IMPROVEMENT CONTINUES

With the support of the VSP Eye Health Management Program, PHC continues to see improvements. Dilated eye exam rates for their Medicare business increased from 71.2% in 2011, to 76.1% in 2012. Their glaucoma screening rate increased from 60.4% to 66.9% for the same period.

Eye exam rates for PHC’s Medi-Cal line of business increased as well, moving from 54.8% in 2011, to 56.8% in 2012 in Napa, Solano, and Yolo Counties and 49.6% to 54.2% in Sonoma County for the same period.

LOOKING FORWARD

Buehrer-Salas also pointed out that the long-term ROI for better identification and management of both diabetes and glaucoma patients is significant. “When it comes to long-term diabetes, you are looking at things like amputations, hospital stays, and even hospitalization for heart attacks,” she said. “But if you can do a better job of managing that chronic condition through a program like the VSP Eye Health Management Program, you will be able to avoid many of those very expenses.”

“As a health professional who’s dedicated to quality care, I want to encourage all health plans, if they have that same opportunity, to take VSP up on it ... because having that partner is the key to success!”

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