

Entira Family Clinics Meets Patient Needs on Many Levels

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Organization Profiled

Entira Family Clinics, Vadnais Heights, St. Paul, Minnesota

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Organization Profile

Entira Family Clinics is an independent organization of family physicians located in St. Paul, Minnesota. It includes 60 physicians and 13 mid-level providers offering comprehensive, patient-centered services through 12 neighborhood-based family medicine clinics. The Vadnais Heights clinic includes four physicians and one physician assistant.

Statement of Interest

Medical groups today strive to meet patient needs on many levels. The Clinician and Group Consumer Assessment of Healthcare Providers and Systems (CG-CAHPS) survey documents medical group performance in five areas of patient-centered care:

- Patients' rating of the provider (doctor)
- Getting timely appointments, care, and information
- How well providers (doctors) communicate with patients
- Helpful, courteous, and respectful office staff
- Follow-up on test results

In each of these areas, certain medical groups are excellent performers, with consistent high scores on specific CG-CAHPS measures. Picker Institute case studies explore the ways medical groups achieve these outstanding results, and share examples of best practices.

This case study profiles Entira Family Clinics, Vadnais Heights, which the Picker Institute has identified as a high performer in delivering patient-centered care based on its exemplary performance in CG-CAHPS publicly reported data for "How well providers (doctors) communicate with patients."



How Well Providers Communicate with Patients

The survey asks patients how often their providers explained things clearly and listened carefully to them. The specific questions are:

- Provider explained things in a way that was easy to understand
- Provider listened carefully to patient
- Provider gave easy-to-understand information about health questions or concerns
- Provider knew important information about patient's medical history
- Provider showed respect for what patient had to say
- Provider spent enough time with patient

Possible responses for these questions include "Never," "Sometimes," "Usually," and "Always."

Entira Family Clinics Meets Patient Needs on Many Levels

Entira Family Clinics, Vadnais Heights has an unusual staffing pattern, and a unique layout. There are four physicians, and each physician is supported by two clinical assistants. The clinic is laid out so each team of physician and clinical assistants share a common space. Their exam rooms are lined up in close proximity within that space, so they have line-of-sight communications throughout the workspace. All three of them sit near each other, and needed communications flow effortlessly throughout the day.

How did this unusual staffing pattern develop? Keith A. Oelschlager, M.D., a family physician and the CEO of Entira Family Clinics, recalls that when they moved into the building, 17 years ago, they asked themselves whether they could use the space in a more effective way. "We noticed that people in certain roles tend to burn out quickly, and we thought that if people were cross-trained to do a variety of activities, they would have a more satisfying work experience." Physicians were intimately involved in planning the new space. The system was set up with clinical assistants cross-trained to do many different activities; the overall staffing ratio remained at an acceptable level, but each person had a wide variety of tasks throughout the day.

"The way the clinic is set up gives the provider and the CAs more time to spend with patients, and they don't have to feel so rushed," said Tracy Schulke, Office Manager. Ruth Herman, M.B.A.-H., RN, Director of Clinical Practice, added, "The staffing model definitely supports better communication. They are able to focus on one thing at a time. They can spend enough time to ensure the patient has understood important information, rather than just giving information and assuming it has been understood. In addition, the physical layout supports enhanced communication. When a patient leaves the exam room, they walk past the physician so they can touch base with them as they leave."

Because there are two clinical assistants, they are able to support each other with pointers on the best way to do a specific procedure. They can brainstorm together to deal with any unexpected situations. One CA is able to follow up with the patient, give immunizations, talk about next steps in their care, and walk them out of the room, while the other CA is rooming the next patient.

"One of the important benefits of the CA teams is the way they get to know the





patients,” said David Rossmiller, M.D., a physician at the clinic. “Our CAs do everything: they draw blood, they take X-rays, they room the patients, they do the callbacks...they have multiple contacts with each patient. I can trust them to share information accurately with people, and the patient has a relationship with them as well as with me.”

Each morning starts with a huddle between all the CAs where they talk about potential workflow issues throughout the day: who is coming in late or leaving early, how to cover lunches, and so on. Each physician/CA team has a weekly huddle to talk about patients who are coming in and may have special needs, potential areas for improvement, and other issues.

“The two CAs do so much to keep us efficient,” said Theresa M. Wollan, M.D., family physician. “One person brings a patient to a room for a physical. The other one comes behind and says ‘I’m going to draw your blood and process it while this CA is taking your information.’ They call it tag-teaming. One CA gets shots ready for an infant while the other coordinates processes in several rooms. When you only have one CA, as soon as you task them to do one thing then they can’t do anything more.”

Cara Marvin, RMA, is the clinical assistant for Dr. Wollan, and she has worked with her for almost 12 years. Emily, the other clinical assistant, has been there for four years. Together, they all know what to expect from each other. “Emily is fantastic. We’re always one step ahead of each other,” Marvin said. “We like to keep the workflow as even as possible. She’ll room a patient and I’ll go in and do the blood work. Then I’ll room the next

person and she’ll do the blood work. We trade off.” Except for vacations and emergencies, the teams generally function together. When they discuss their work, they sound as if they know how to cope together smoothly with any situation that could arise.

Physicians Manage Time So Patients Understand Their Care

Survey results show that Entira Family Clinics, Vadnais Heights is exceptionally effective at physician communication with patients. That means listening carefully to patients, explaining things in a way that’s easy to understand, showing respect for what the patient has to say, and spending enough time with the patient.

How do they do that? “It’s important to meet patients where they are in their understanding of medical conditions,” Dr. Wollan said. “You need to know someone well enough to see how much they can grasp about what is going on.” Entira has developed a culture that balances the need to stay on schedule with the need for patients to understand what is happening. “Our goal is to keep ourselves close to on time, and respect the patient’s time as well,” she said. “We’ll also take whatever time is needed so the patient can join in the process of deciding what is going to happen in their healthcare.”

When new patients come to the clinic, the physicians and CAs make a point of explaining how much time is needed for different sorts of interactions. They invite each patient to be an active participant in managing time so they get the information and care they need, or schedule additional time when that is appropriate.

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Entira has a secure patient portal and Dr. Wollan sometimes uses it in place of a follow-up visit for computer-savvy patients. For example, when she sees someone for a mental health visit and medication adjustment, she may ask them to let her know via the portal after two weeks how they respond to the medication. Dr. Wollan emphasizes that this is not simply a form of email. Each “Web encounter” is one interaction, focused on one specific topic. She deals with every one of these Web encounters herself, and spends about half an hour to 40 minutes per day dealing with them. Even though at present she does not receive reimbursement for these interactions, she feels they are worthwhile. “Patients truly appreciate this option,” she said. “It may take me 24 to 48 hours to respond, so this method is not suitable for urgent issues. My patients feel confident about these interactions because they see my timestamp and can tell that it’s me talking with them.”

Dr. Rossmiller makes a special effort to speak plainly with patients and avoid medical jargon. He invents down-home analogies to explain complex medical terms. For example, “Picture what happens when you cut a bike tire but not the tube and then you pump it up and the tire pooches out through that hole,” he said. “That is sort of what a Baker’s cyst is like, or an aneurysm.”

He has a standard pattern for office visits, and he always begins by shaking hands. “I put my computer down, I ask how I can help them, while I sit down and rub in some hand sanitizer. I’m looking at them and listening, and they know that they have my full attention.” Because he establishes this atmosphere at the beginning of the visit, his patients recognize that he is listening to them attentively, even though later on in the visit he may also need to take notes.

One of his principles is never talk with patients when they’re wearing paper. “I step out while they change out of their clothes; then they change back before I talk to them about



what's going on," he said. "When you're wearing paper, or even a gown, your ability to comprehend information is close to zero."

Dr. Rossmiller's patients include quite a few disabled adults from a group home. Since they may have conditions such as cerebral palsy or a traumatic brain injury, and are not capable of living independently, he often needs to communicate changes in care orders to their caregivers. He finds that the patient portal is particularly effective for this sort of communication. "It is much less cumbersome than the older system of faxing information back and forth," he said. "I also find the portal useful when answering questions, since we have information already documented in our computer and it's easy to send it on."

He makes a special effort to create ongoing relationships with patients. "That's the fun part of the visit," he said. "A preceptor of mine said, 'Try to learn something every day about what other people do. When you get done with medical school and residency you might know a lot about medicine, but that doesn't mean you know much about anything else.'"

A family medicine physician finds himself caring for whole families. Dr. Rossmiller recalls one family where the son was sick with two different forms of pneumonia, the husband had a myosarcoma in his leg, and his wife came in with a bladder infection. "When I ask how everybody is doing, I'm not just asking about the medical issues," he said. "I'm relating to everything that's going on in their

lives. That's what family practice is about, taking care of multiple generations, treating the whole family."

In fact, he cares for quite a few families that include four generations. Entira physicians often find themselves playing a key role working with the patient and family to resolve potential obstacles to the plan of care. Recently, Dr. Rossmiller stepped forward to work with a family where the great-grandparents were living independently in a senior apartment, but there were various disputes going on. "I take care of everyone in the family, and they were having a hard time setting limits, so I said, 'We'll make an appointment and have everybody come in and we'll just hash it out.' If various providers were taking care of the different people, it would have been much more difficult. Just because I know their personalities and strengths, and I have worked with the whole family over time, I am able to play a special role."

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Standardized Work Patterns and Listening at All Levels

The clinic has developed a number of standardized patterns that lead to increased efficiency and make work flow more easily. When patients check in at the front desk, all of the needed paperwork is completed before they go back to see the provider. The clinic has developed standardized processes for intake and rooming patients, as well as standing orders for many situations. These standardized procedures and processes are reviewed annually, so everyone gets a refresher on the required steps.

The clinical assistants are aware how important it is to manage expectations and communicate with patients so nothing comes as a surprise. For example, they will let the patient know how the doctor's schedule is

flowing and when the doctor will be with them.

Every person we spoke with at Entira Family Clinics, Vadnais Heights said the clinic exemplifies a culture of "listening at all levels." All employees are treated with respect, and there's a real sense of teamwork. For example, Dr. Rossmiller notes that front desk staffers often pick up on atmospheres and particular situations, and share this information with providers as appropriate. "They will greet somebody and get them registered for the visit, and then they may pop back to share information with me about their current situation."

Each month there's a joint staff meeting that includes physicians, clinical assistants, and front desk staff and offers an opportunity for staffers to voice concerns and offer suggestions for improvements. Many of these suggestions are tested in practice, and often spark permanent changes.

For example, the clinic uses a two-question form to screen for depression. Patients who are positive on the first screen then receive a follow-up nine-question screen. Initially, the front desk incorporated depression screening as part of the sign-in paperwork, but over several months they realized it took quite a long time. The front desk staff brought this up at the monthly meeting, and everyone agreed to have the CAs do the screening later as part of the intake process in the exam room.

Fast-Track Appointments Meet Patient Needs

The Vadnais Heights clinic tends to be quite busy, with many appointments scheduled well in advance. A few years ago, the clinic set up a special "fast track" scheduling process for five specific acute conditions: sinus problems, rashes, and ear, throat, and urinary tract infections. These are designed as 15-minute appointments, focused on one problem, for well-defined conditions with non-controversial treatments, so they can be dealt with effectively during a short visit. Usually patients need to wait for about 20 minutes, and they are seen by any provider who has time to fit them into the schedule.

"Our providers agree this is the right thing to do. It impacts all our providers equally and benefits their patients equally," Herman said. "The fast-track process increases timely access and boosts patient satisfaction. It also limits the total cost of care, since we're saving

them an ER visit—that’s where many of these patients would end up if we didn’t make special efforts to accommodate their requests.” The Vadnais Heights clinic initially pioneered this fast-track process, and recently two additional Entira clinics started using it. Eventually it will be rolled out to all clinics throughout the organization.

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Internal Incentives for Top-Quality Care

Many of Entira’s current contracts include external incentives based on pay-for-performance, total cost of care, and similar programs. For the past five years, Entira has also maintained internal incentive awards for high-quality care, based in part on specific quality metrics, such as HbA1c control for diabetics, blood pressure control, chlamydia screening rates, colon cancer screening rates, specific goals for people with vascular disease, and many similar measures. In addition, Entira has internal incentives based on what the organization calls “good citizenship,” which means participating in activities that help Entira run smoothly, such as attending medical staff and committee meetings, or doing public work in the community. A third cluster of internal incentives is based on patient satisfaction, expressed via the overall patient satisfaction score on the CG-CAHPS survey.

Some incentives are based on the work of each clinic as a whole; others are based on the work of specific providers. “Internally we assign specific awards for various targeted measures, and we discuss this using many different methods,” Herman said. “Communications flow from clinical quality representatives to each clinic, and from clinic managers to each clinic. We also send reminder messages via email, and we discuss



our targeted measures personally during site visits and walk-arounds, so everyone is aware of these efforts to improve clinical quality. We talk about this throughout the year, and the incentive awards are given at the end of that year.”

“We estimate that about 10 percent of our revenue from insurance companies or the government is based on meeting quality metrics,” Dr. Oelschlager said. “Essentially we’re trying to mimic that with these internal awards. Every year for the last five years, we’ve gradually increased the amount in the budget to try to make the internal awards a bit more significant.”

He added, “Not to toot our own horn, but on most metrics we’re usually in the top five in the state. Often we’re in the top one or two. We are also one of the lower cost organizations in Minnesota, and our patient satisfaction data shows that people are generally pleased with the way we provide care, so we feel pretty good about our record.”

In setting up these internal awards that mimic incentives from insurance companies and government programs, Entira is preparing itself for expected changes in the health-care system. As insurers and federal payers increasingly emphasize value-based purchasing and population health, Entira will be prepared for success under these incentives, and for closer alliances with insurers.

We Want Patients to Leave with a Smile on Their Face

Entira Family Clinics has an organization-wide quality committee, with each clinic represented by a physician. Dr. Wollan represents Vadnais Heights. CG-CAHPS survey scores are not posted, but are shared through the quality committee meetings, as well as data on the organization’s latest quality initiatives. Dr. Wollan brings this information back from the quality committee meetings, and shares the results at a provider meeting and again at a staff meeting.

Since a physician is responsible for communicating quality information throughout the organization, this leads to other physicians readily absorbing and acting on this information. This may be one of the reasons why, compared to other organizations, Entira seems to conduct quality improvement in an organic way, without strain. It does not have a Lean management program, for example. It doesn’t have formal team training or customer service programs. At the same time, it does have many quality initiatives and bases significant financial incentives on various quality measures. Entira is a physician-owned organization, and its physicians take the lead in clinical quality and patient-centered care. This is an organization that is continually improving, constantly seeking its own path to more effective care.

Entira’s authentic concern for patients has been established for so many years now it is

embedded throughout the organizational culture. When hiring new employees, the clinic seeks out people with similar values who will fit into and support the existing pattern. “In general, this clinic seeks people with upbeat personalities, people who are very friendly and outgoing,” Marvin said.

Entira sometimes thinks of interactions with patients in terms of “touches,” asking how many connections or touches it takes for a patient to feel that the clinic is truly connected to them and truly a partner in their healthcare. “We don’t know the magic number, but if I saw someone once a year and then they saw a nurse practitioner twice a year, I don’t believe that would be enough to keep them connected,” Dr. Wollan said. One reason she uses Web encounters with some patients is that it offers a relatively speedy, convenient “touch.” Whenever someone arrives as a new patient, within the next day or two they receive a card thanking them for choosing Entira Family Clinics as their clinic—that is another “touch.”

Dr. Oelschlager doesn’t know how many “touches” it takes to create a long-term relationship with a patient, but forming those relationships is an essential aspect of healthcare. “We have developed long-term patient relationships and patients value that,” he said. “That’s the most important thing that allows us to continue as an independent entity in the marketplace.”

Entira physicians are treating families that sometimes extend over four generations. Dr. Oelschlager suggests that one reason Entira is able to offer less expensive care is that “people trust us. We don’t have to do something if it’s not necessary; we are able to practice good



medicine. Our patients are loyal and these long-term relationships help us.”

One of the slogans you sometimes hear around the Vadnais Heights clinic is, “Do the one little thing.” This phrase captures the prevailing attitude among people who want to go beyond usual limits, who want to help every patient. “Sometimes you do just one little thing, and patients appreciate it so much,” Schulke said. She recalled an incident recently when a patient needed a new medication. The family lived in a neighborhood that was on Schulke’s

way home, so she decided to drop it off. This wasn’t part of her official job description, but she felt it was just a small favor; it was something she could do. “We constantly remind ourselves that our patients are human; we need to treat them as though they were part of our family,” she said.

Similarly, Marvin lists the small things Dr. Wollan does that make a big difference for her patients. “There’s a Keurig at the desk and she buys coffee for the Keurig. When patients come in and need to wait, the clinical assistants offer them coffee, tea, or hot chocolate, and they love it,” she said. She recalls one patient whose appointment was scheduled on her birthday. She was turning 90 and Dr. Wollan brought her a cake. “I feel so fortunate to work in this environment,” Marvin said. “We combine excellent clinical care with a great deal of human warmth. Dr. Wollan models a certain way of being with patients. By now, it’s what we’ve grown to be. I know she wouldn’t accept anything less, and I wouldn’t either. We want our patients to feel welcome when they come in; we want them to leave with a smile on their face.”

Physicians and staff at Vadnais Heights treat each other, and their patients, with respect. They set up their environment and work processes so patient needs are met, work flows in a balanced way, and continuous improvement is embedded in the culture. Physicians and staff consistently take the time to focus on their patients and listen to them attentively. All of these efforts naturally lead to the clinic’s positive results on patient surveys, and to mutually reinforcing and rewarding relationships with patients.