

A photograph of a female nurse with curly brown hair, wearing blue scrubs and a purple stethoscope, sitting and talking to a patient whose back is to the camera. The scene is set in a clinical environment with a whiteboard and colorful items in the background.

**Better Communication Helps
Hospitals & Health Systems Stay
Connected to the Community**



Hospitals and health systems are continually seeking new and strategic ways to improve patient care, expand their presence, facilitate growth and alleviate economic pressures. Hospitals rely on referrals from community-based physicians and must draw patients from all areas.

Given that many hospitals have a broad service area, staying connected with referring community providers requires a deliberate strategic approach that facilitates communication and maintains a relationship or “stickiness” with those providers.

Disparate EHRs, call scheduling systems and workflows can make communication across multiple physicians, practices, and locations difficult. Physicians are also inundated with newsletters, emails, and other communication that clog up their emails and mailboxes. It is easy for critical clinical communication to get lost in the shuffle, often resulting in delayed responses and delayed patient care.

This paper explores how two leading hospitals used an innovative communication strategy to create “stickiness” with community-based physicians, enhance access to their physicians and facilities, improve care and even help address the total cost of care for patients.



Improving Communication and Collaboration

Last year, a leading hospital in Chicago, IL, served more than 198,000 patients from 50 states and 51 countries. The hospital's clinically integrated network (CIN), has over 1,000 participating providers and 110,000 managed lives under contract. Until recently, referring physicians often struggled to connect with the specialists because they were unsure of WHO (or which physician) they should contact and they were unclear of HOW to contact a provider given different contact rules for various divisions.

Keeping in mind that any strategy had to ensure the security of protected health information (PHI), the hospital and CIN had multiple objectives for their communication strategy including:

- Improving access to specialists while respecting their time, privacy and practice efficiency concerns.
- Manage “leakage” from the CIN.
- Facilitating outbound communication with providers upon discharge.

After a comprehensive RFP process, they chose to implement PH Connect to address their strategic needs and PHI security requirements.

Improving access to specialist while respecting their time commitments

With many of the hospital's specialty services already very busy, they knew that improving access to their doctors had to be accomplished in the least disruptive manner possible. PH Connect's one-time availability set up, its incorporation of residents, fellows and mid-level providers, as well as its intelligent message routing, allows physicians to protect their non-clinical

time and route certain types of messages to the appropriate resource.

Since implementation, more than 7,000 messages have been sent through PH Connect, including communications from 44 PCP practices and 39 divisions of the hospital. The system connects more than 220 community providers directly to nearly 1,100 hospital providers, supporting true care coordination for their patients.

“PH Connect saves physicians the time it takes to make multiple phone calls, speak with multiple other staff, wait on hold, or wait for a return call in order to connect with another physician during a busy clinic day,” reports one of the client physicians.

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Physician

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To ensure widespread adoption, Proficient Health worked specifically with each division to make certain that PH Connect supported every unique workflow and preference. This “high touch” approach enabled ongoing physician adoption and helped meet unique needs of individual specialty departments.



Connecting Providers and Psychiatry Specialist

The hospital launched its MAACC program (Mood, Anxiety, ADHD Collaborative Care) in summer of 2018 with the goal to train and assist the provider community to provide specifically defined mental health services locally while simultaneously providing better access to specialists when required.

After completing the hospital's developed training program, community providers can use PH Connect to quickly and easily access an array of the hospital's psychiatric specialists. Primary care providers choose from pre-set "roles" including Assessments, Medications and Referrals.

to each message and provide the appropriate guidance, often before the patient has left the primary care office.

In the first three months, 32 different provider practices began using PH Connect to securely connect to the hospital's psychiatry services to better address the mental health needs of their patients.

"Community providers have commented on how simple the PH Connect framework is to use once it is set up. It is very user-friendly and saves time," expressed a hospital leader.



Based on the role, the message will be directed to the division assigned resource: either a clinical coordinator, psychologist or psychiatrist. The designated division resource will respond

"PH Connect works very well for the MAACC program and the process we follow," explained one provider. "I promptly hear back when I send a referral and get another message when the patient has been reached and an evaluation has been scheduled."



Enabling Same-Day Ortho Appointments

PH Connect helped the hospital's orthopedics gain a competitive edge by streamlining same-day appointment requests. Prior to using PH Connect to address this issue, they would frequently see a high degree of leakage due to availability of local orthopedic urgent care.

Using PH Connect, a community-based resource can now easily schedule same-day appointments for their patients. After opening the mobile application, the provider (or their office support resource) chooses one of three convenient locations and securely sends patient information including DOB, contact number, diagnosis, imaging/testing already done, and whether surgery is potentially needed. Ortho staff can respond quickly with available appointment times and schedule with the family directly.

Similar initiatives are also in place with the hospital's ENT and cardiology divisions.

Managing "leakage" from the CIN

Within 110,000 lives across the Chicagoland area, the CIN wanted to make it as easy as possible for its participating providers to have their patients treated by their own specialists and in their facilities whenever appropriate. Every patient that receives care outside the network is a lost opportunity to improve quality, patient outcomes and ultimately costs. CIN leadership understood that if the hospital-based specialists are the easiest to reach and communicate with, it quickly becomes best to use non-network resources.

More specifically, CIN providers wanted to be able to ask their specialist colleagues at the hospital questions about a patient's care while the patient was in the office. Traditional methods of reaching a clinical resource could take several phone calls and extended wait time. By offering PH Connect to CIN community-based providers, they can contact the right resource by using a "role" (i.e. cardiology on-call) right from their cell phone and get a response within four minutes. These quick responses helped make critical decisions about patient care and helped ensure the patient stayed within the network. In addition, the simplicity of PH Connect and the response times from the specialists can help avoid unnecessary ED visits, duplicative testing and other costly procedures.

When asked what she most enjoys about PH Connect, one provider stated, "In particular, I love it for sending confidential questions to the hospital's specialists about specific patients. My practice is not on Epic so I cannot do this through the electronic health record."

PH Connect's client success manager worked proactively with the CIN to identify high leakage clinical areas and set up specific programs to address network utilization. Specialty specific programs like same-day ortho appointments offered through PH Connect allows each division to customize their approach to accessibility.

Facilitating Outbound Communication

Hospital-based physicians attend to thousands of patients every year. When these patients are ready to return to their homes, it is imperative that their local provider understand the treatment plan and any nuances associated with their care.

PH Connect enables hospitalists and hospital specialists to quickly connect with the selected physician or their practice resource on call. Using PH Connect, providers are quickly informed when a patient is going home and about critical next steps.

“With over 13,000 births per year, the turnover in our 86-bed level IV NICU is high and necessitates frequent communication with our community pediatricians. As a NICU hospitalist, PH Connect is a huge time saver for me. Now I can skip the operators and answering services and directly reach our outpatient pediatricians via voice or text in a HIPAA-compliant manner,” states a hospital-based provider.



Enhancing Care Coordination and Cutting Costs

A leading hospital in Raleigh, North Carolina, provides care for thousands of patients each year through their emergency department, neonatal and intensive care units. Occupancy at the hospital averages 86 percent and frequently exceeds 100 percent.

With a regional territory including more than 1,000 providers and referring physicians, they understand how important access and communication are to achieving their strategic growth objectives.

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I find PH Connect to be an easy way for me to communicate with the emergency room about patients in my office that need further evaluation there. I like that I get confirmation that my message has been read by a staff member of the ER. It is an efficient way to connect with the specialist at the hospital without having to use the hospital operator and wait for a callback.

Referring Provider

However, at the time, community-based physicians had a hard time reaching specialists based on a confusing list of various numbers and instructions depending on day of the week, time of day, secondary contacts (such as a PA) and other variables. The situation was not only frustrating, but also inefficient, resulting in an ineffective use of resources.

As the hospital evaluated their strategic options to address these issues, they sought to ensure the proposed solutions would:

- Improve access to the hospital and its specialists
- Facilitate rapid growth of new providers
- Achieve better care at lower costs
- Improve hospital throughput to impact occupancy



Improve Access to Hospital and Specialists

With two academic medical centers in the area, the competitive dynamics of patient care in the Raleigh-Durham-Chapel Hill region is intense. The hospital set out to have top tier sub-specialists and be the easiest doctors and facilities to reach. With quality being roughly equal for most care, they knew that making it easy to access their resources would win over the hearts and minds of community and regional providers.



After evaluating many solutions, PH Connect was chosen as its preferred method of secure communication. While the provider to provider communication features were unparalleled, the PH Connect platform allowed providers to send a message to the ED about a patient's pending arrival. This ensured the ED knew the patient was arriving and what to expect, enhancing both patient and physician satisfaction.

"I find PH Connect to be an easy way for me to communicate with the emergency room about patients in my office that need further evaluation there. I like that I get confirmation that my message has been read by a staff member of the ER. Also, PH Connect is an easy way to contact the hospitalist about a direct admission or contact surgery about a patient who might need to be seen in their outpatient clinic. It is an efficient way to connect with the specialist at the hospital without having to use the hospital operator and wait for a callback," said one provider.

Another stated, "I've really appreciated PH Connect. As a specialist provider in the pediatric world, it has been so helpful in connecting with the local pediatricians. I can easily text them via PH Connect and let them know anything pertinent, and then ask for help in follow up with our patients. It really does improve communication and patient care, most importantly."

Facilitate Rapid Growth of New Providers

As the hospital launched new physician practices and expanded its services, it became clear that they needed to streamline access to those new resources. Providers continued to contact the incumbent providers that they knew rather than the on-call provider. As a result, the workload was disproportionately falling on the established providers, delays in care were occurring and new providers were taking longer than anticipated to "ramp up" their practices.

One such example is the endocrinology practice. To address the challenge, the call schedule for the practice was built and maintained in PH Connect and the role "Endocrinologists On-Call" was created. The Emergency Department secretaries were trained to use this on-call role to request consults. Community providers were given material on the best and quickest way to reach all specialists, including endocrinologists. All training urged people to use roles instead of physician names so that messages would be answered quickly. Within months the workload between providers balanced out and community physicians were pleased with the response to their inquiries.

"PH Connect has helped us to streamline our provider-to-provider communications. This solution helps us to consistently route provider calls to the on-call physician without delay, allowing us to securely and rapidly respond to internal and external calls. The primary care physicians we work with love that we are so easy to reach," shared a physician leader.

Achieve Better Care at Lower Costs

As a partner of an Accountable Care Organization (ACO), with more than 200,000 covered lives, the hospital physicians and executives knew that the ED was such a large cost driver and that avoiding even a fraction of those visits would ensure that patients get better care while positively impacting the costs associated with that.

By making specialists more accessible, ED visits can be more productive or avoided altogether. By way of example, a community-based provider strongly suspected appendicitis in a patient. Rather than send the patient to the ED for further evaluation and decision, the provider used PH Connect to reach out to the surgeon on call. Within a few minutes, the surgeon understood the situation, called back, discussed the case and advised the provider to send the patient directly to patient registration. The patient was in surgery within two hours, and released to go home four hours after that.

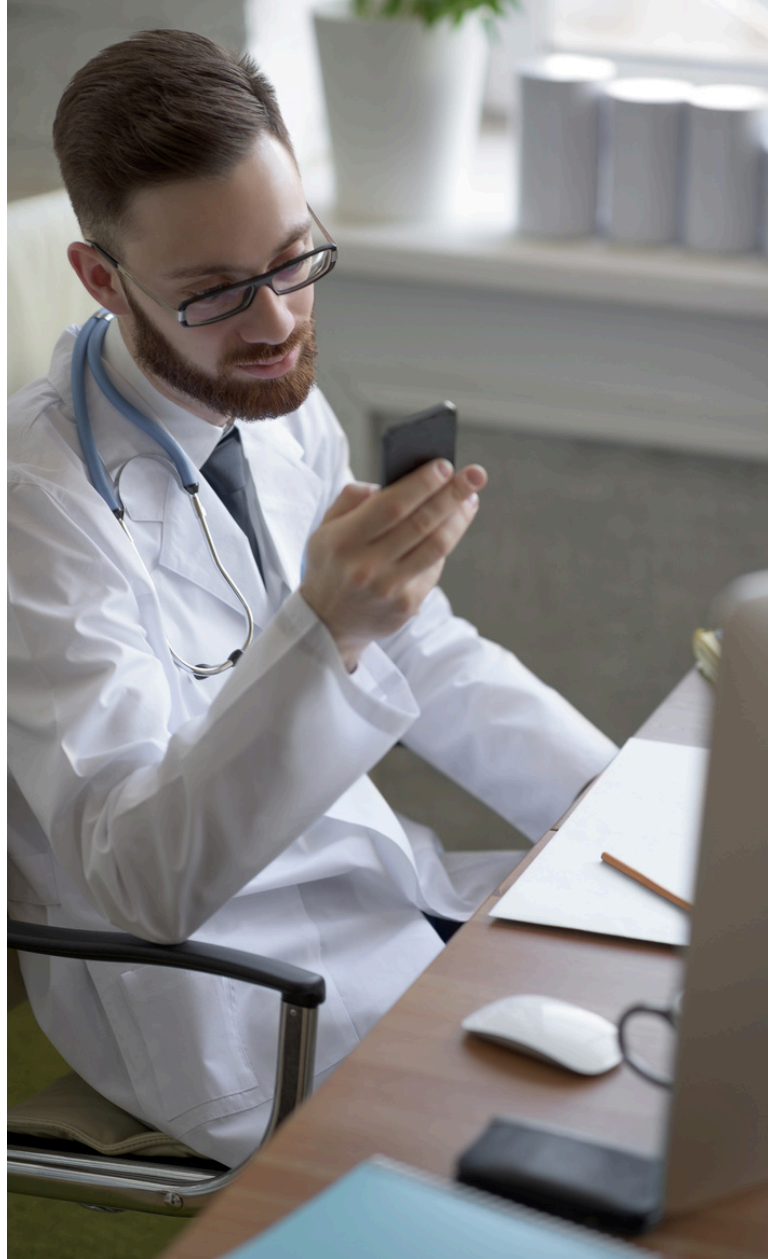
Thanks to PH Connect, the patient was able to avoid delays in the ED, unnecessary tests, delayed after-hours surgery and an overnight stay. On top of that, the surgeon used PH Connect to relay status back to the provider, enabling follow-up the next day.



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“I was stunned by how smoothly this worked. I knew if the patient was sent to the ED she would end up waiting longer than necessary. PH Connect allowed me and the specialists to communicate about the plan with no hassles. It was best for the patient and gave me peace of mind to know the status of her progress at every step.”

--Referring provider



Improving Hospital Throughput

With the hospital's occupancy averaging 86 percent and frequently exceeding 100 percent, they were seeking mechanisms to streamline the discharge process. Frequently, last-minute consult requests can delay a discharge up to an entire day. When discharge orders are placed into the EMR they are often not seen until the consulting specialists check their inbox, which could be hours or even days later. To improve this process, PH Connect integrated with the EMR, in this case EPIC, and used its Intelligent Message Routing mechanism to actively alert the requested specialists (or the on-call resource for that service). PH Connect can write back to the EMR when the message is read and notify by whom (in the case of going to an on-call provider). This relatively simple approach to consult alerting has dramatically improved time to consult and improved ALOS across the facility.

"We are thrilled that we can now be notified immediately through PH Connect, when a provider enters a consult in EPIC. The great part is that the sender does not have to decide whom to notify. PH Connect does that for us," explained an APN provider.

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"Provider-to-provider messaging via PH Connect improves patient care hundreds of times each day through several mechanisms.

PH Connect allows providers real-time access to each other without prior knowledge of call schedules; enables them to share patient-specific information securely, unlike conventional texting; and provides read receipts to communicate that messages have been received."

-- Provider leader

Conclusion

Are you getting the most from your hospital's communication solution?

Neither of these hospitals really set out to secure their communication systems. Instead, they were trying to achieve strategic imperatives of improving patient care, growing the enterprise and managing cost of care— all while minimizing security risks. Better communication helped address these challenges and many more. How are you responding to these same issues?

Does your current communication solution help...

- Enable better communication across the care continuum, ease referrals and expedite patient care?
- Keep care in the network?
- Improve efficiencies and control total cost of care?
- Get the most from your existing EMR investment?

If you answered "no" to any of these questions, Proficient Health can help.

The PH Connect platform delivers a comprehensive approach to communication that builds upon the company's deep understanding of healthcare and the care continuum. PH Connect builds on awareness of the unique needs of each healthcare team member, meeting them at the point of quickest access in their workflow, including desktop workstations, mobile devices, pagers, duty phones and email.

About Proficient Health

Proficient Health is a healthcare information technology company specializing in solutions for the secure exchange of referrals and clinical information. Our affordable, online services and mobility solutions connect physicians, hospitals and other healthcare providers – helping them easily share and manage information, improve service and care delivery, drive down costs, speed reimbursement and get more out of their electronic medical records platform.

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