The Next Role in Healthcare

Physician as Chief Experience Officer

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Physicians: The Next Chief Experience Officers

by M. Bridget Duffy, MD

It took a government mandate for healthcare systems to begin measuring and publicly reporting patient satisfaction with their care experience. It also took a government mandate for health systems to begin financially incenting improvements in the care experience. As a physician and healthcare executive who has dedicated her career to improving the human experience of care, I wish healthcare organizations had gotten here on their own. But, however we got here, I am extremely grateful that, finally, improving patient experience is gaining the importance it deserves in healthcare organizations across the country.

Today, physicians are stepping up to lead this work as Chief Experience Officers (CXOs). I receive a call every other week from a physician or recruitment firm seeking guidance on how to create the role of Chief Quality, Efficiency and Patient Experience Officer. My team and I have helped many of these individuals and organizations write CXO job descriptions, develop strategic roadmaps, and begin implementing plans to make patient experience improvement a reality for their organization. National networks are being created to support their efforts, including our own Patient Experience Collaborative. At long last, humanizing healthcare is no longer considered the “soft stuff.” It is viewed by the most forward-thinking organizations as the only way to drive sustainable growth, move the needle on quality, and build lasting loyalty. Experience improvement is one of the hottest new priorities in healthcare and it is not going away.

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Who should lead patient and staff experience improvement work? Some say everyone should “own” patient experience so why appoint a Chief Experience Officer? Using a similar comparison, some also believe that everyone should “own” quality and safety, but time after time, it has been demonstrated that without a dedicated Chief Quality Officer, little improvement is made. The same is true for “owning” efficiency, reliability and cost reduction, where real and sustainable change happens only when these efforts are driven by leaders who are accountable for results. Patient experience is no different. Meaningful, sustained improvement begins with dedicated leadership. Ownership by committee simply lacks the authority and accountability required for meaningful change.
Once established, I believe the executive responsibility to lead patient experience improvement efforts is best held by a physician. Why physicians? Physicians, by virtue of the role they play in healthcare organizations and with their patients, are in the best position to drive improvements in patient experience. And, we know that physicians can either be a catalyst for change or its greatest obstacle. By putting them in charge of patient experience, physicians, in partnership with nursing and other executives, can galvanize the support of other physicians and ensure patient experience becomes and continues to be a top organizational priority.

Finally, with a strong, respected physician CXO leading the charge, they can more readily integrate this work with quality, safety and efficiency as part of a complete clinical excellence strategy. In fact, addressing patient experience outside of the context of clinical quality and safety is often times ineffective and fatiguing to organizations. Dr. Stephen Weber, Chief Medical Officer of University of Chicago Medicine, who leads the organization’s office of patient experience says, “It was eye opening to me when after years of being in charge of ‘Clinical Effectiveness’ I recently took on oversight of the patient and family experience. It was only then that we began to see the synergy that comes from integrating all this work.”

After establishing this role at the Cleveland Clinic and guiding other organizations in their effort to create an Office of Patient Experience, I came to the realization of how critical it is to appoint a professional with a clinical background. Why? Because to truly transform healthcare, we need to focus on proactively improving the human experience and creating new standards of care, not simply create a customer service or service recovery program.

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– Craig Albanese, MD
Vice President of Quality and Performance
Lucile Packard Children’s Hospital at Stanford

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Dr. Craig Albanese, Vice President of Quality and Performance Improvement at Lucile Packard Children’s Hospital sees experience improvement as a core element of performance and quality improvement. He explains, “There is an ongoing need for service recovery in healthcare – solving the problems we’ve created instead of avoiding them in the first place. True service in healthcare is defined by high-quality, safe, empathetic and efficient delivery of care.”
What makes for a successful CXO? To be successful, the CXO not only needs clinical credibility, they also need strong leadership skills, the ability to unify doctors, nurses, and staff around a shared mission and a commitment to humanizing the delivery of medical care. Dr. Jon Rahman, System Vice President and Chief Medical Officer at St. Vincent Health, part of the Ascension Health system, says, “Patients want compassion and connection in their healthcare experience. That makes clinical leadership essential to making experience work.”

The CXO cannot succeed alone. The most successful organizations appoint a leadership triad comprised of a physician, nurse, and administrative leader who partner together to create seamless, consistent care experiences by improving communication and connectivity across the care continuum and innovating in other ways that improve the patient experience.

Experience transformation takes time and commitment. In the long run, it takes a strong culture that reflects a dedication to continuously innovating to strengthen human connections, drive optimal outcomes, and deliver care more cost effectively. And, it takes resources and the support of the Board to focus on the human experience of care right alongside the traditional focus on quality and efficiency.

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Many hospitals and health systems struggle to justify an investment in patient experience because they are under intense pressure to meet financial targets. But leading organizations know that driving innovation in the human experience by strengthening a culture of caring, bringing nurses and doctors back to the bedside, and deploying processes and technologies that humanize healthcare, is the only way they will meet their clinical and financial goals in the long run.

The good news is that patient experience improvement is gaining traction as a strategic priority in healthcare organizations nationwide and the role of a CXO as a critical c-suite position in healthcare is becoming more and more commonplace. Ten years from now I believe we’ll look back and say, “Why did it take so long?”
ABOUT THE EXPERIENCE INNOVATION NETWORK

The Experience Innovation Network supported by Vocera Communications and the Stanford Clinical Excellence Research Center fosters partnerships across organizations to revolutionize healthcare experience and outcomes. Founded by Dr. Bridget Duffy, the first Chief Experience Officer in the nation, this network of healthcare pioneers is accelerating the discovery and adoption of innovations that restore the human connection in healthcare that ultimately improves clinical outcomes, increases patient and staff satisfaction, drives physician loyalty, and creates market differentiation in an uncertain healthcare environment.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

M. Bridget Duffy, M.D., is the Chief Medical Officer (CMO) of Vocera Communications, Inc. Prior to her appointment as CMO at Vocera, Dr. Duffy co-founded and served as Chief Executive Officer of ExperiaHealth, a company that assisted organizations in rapidly improving patient, family and staff experience through innovative solutions that restore the human connection to healthcare. ExperiaHealth was acquired by Vocera and now drives the company’s thought leadership and research agenda as the Experience Innovation Network. Previously, Dr. Duffy served as Chief Experience Officer (CXO) of the Cleveland Clinic—the first healthcare position of its kind in the nation. Her work to lead the patient experience movement has earned her the honor of being named by HealthLeaders magazine as one of “20 People Who Make Healthcare Better” and one of the “Top 50 in Digital Health” by Rock Health. Dr. Duffy attended medical school at the University of Minnesota, and completed her residency in internal medicine at Abbott Northwestern Hospital in Minneapolis, Minnesota.

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