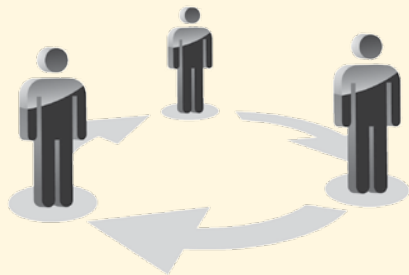


# Quality Improvement Tip-In

In addition to fast exchange of information for referrals using Clarity, practices like the ability to electronically “chat” with their referral partners via secure messaging. Referral completion rates are much better.

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Improvement



**EDITOR'S NOTE:** *This is the third in a series of Quality Improvement Tip-Ins (QITI) to highlight quality improvement efforts of medical groups in Washington. Our goal is to spread the word to a broad audience about what works and to inspire other practices to engage in similar efforts. If your practice has recent quality improvement activities you would like us to highlight, please contact QITI series editor Lance Heineccius at (206) 956-3657 or [Lance@wsma.org](mailto:Lance@wsma.org).*

“**A**T FIRST, I WAS SKEPTICAL and resistant,” says Jeanne Taylor, referral coordinator for Summit View Clinic, a ten-physician primary care practice in Puyallup. “I had a system in place that was working well, that I had developed over the years, and I was comfortable with it.” Clinic managers wanted her to try a new approach, however, based on building a community-wide care coordination system sponsored by Northwest Physician Network, their independent practice association. It took a few months, but she is now an enthusiastic advocate for the new system, called Clarity. “I would never go back,” she says, “Clarity has made everything so much easier.”

LaDonna Mohler, the clinic administrator and Taylor are among the early adopters of a new, bi-directional information exchange for patient referrals. The system was installed in 2010. The software and support system dramatically improve communication among their clinical partners.

“What used to take hours or even days to complete can now be resolved in just a few minutes,” says Mohler. “We often get results back the same day the service is delivered.”

## How does the system work?

The referral coordinator receives from one of the clinic’s physicians a request for a referral to a specialist. She opens the patient’s chart on one screen and copies the needed information (clinical, demographic, etc.) onto the other screen (using software designed to capture the required data elements). The data are immediately submitted electronically to the referral intermediary, Clarity. The Clarity staffers do all insurance verification, obtain pre-authorization when required, make sure all needed information is available and then send it electronically or by fax to the referral physician’s office. If the specialist is a Clarity participant, acknowledgement of the referral (a “receipt”) is sent electronically back to the referring physician at Summit View within one business day.

The specialist’s office staff contacts the patient for scheduling, requests any additional needed information (via secure bi-directional messaging) from the referring provider, and notifies the referring provider of the scheduled visit within three business days. If the patient refuses to schedule, or is a no-show for the appointment, the specialist electronically notifies the

referring provider immediately. As a result, referred patients do not “fall through the cracks”—the referring provider knows to contact the patient for follow-up.

Once the specialist delivers the service, the results or visit status are returned to the referral coordinator at Summit View electronically. If additional information is needed, Clarity follows up with the specialist to make sure the “Results Report” is complete. This “closed loop” of care has resulted in much better referral completion rates and has made all participants (referring clinicians, specialists and patients) more satisfied with care efficiency.

## The era of seamless electronic health information transfer among clinical partners is just beginning, and Summit View Clinic in Puyallup and its partners are on the cutting edge of this new frontier.

Although the referral protocols require the specialist to notify the primary care clinician of the referral results within one week after the appointment, often the information is transmitted the same day. In addition, it is received in a standardized, consistent format, making it much easier to use and store.

### Benefits

In addition to the timely exchange of standardized clinical information, one of the biggest benefits of the system, cited by both Mohler and Taylor, is the ability for the clinical offices to chat back and forth via secure messaging. “It’s done within minutes, not hours or days,” says

Mohler. Further, patient referrals are no longer “lost”—there is an electronic audit trail that shows by name who sent what information, who received the information, and when this all occurred. Primary care physicians especially appreciate knowing immediately when a referral is a no-show for the appointment. Finally, the system archives the information so all members of a patient’s care team, across multiple practices, share a community record of referrals and associated clinical documentation, providing greater transparency across participating practices.

One unexpected benefit has been that Summit View Clinic has also received new patient referrals from specialist partners who much prefer the ease and efficiency of communication made possible by the new system. When a specialist’s patient needs primary care but does not have a primary care doctor, the specialists are frequently referring them to Summit View.

### Building the medical neighborhood

The care coordination network got underway slowly, with just a few NPN-member clinics in the Puyallup area working together to get the bugs out. Two years of patient demographic data were downloaded in a batch file to Clarity to build the referral database. Following an on-site training session, the system was up and running on the first day. The connected community network has grown larger month by month and now has more than 300 clinicians. Some specialists’ offices were originally reluctant to get involved, but the easy-to-use system and the added communication efficiency won them over. In addition, many specialists are seeing more referrals because of the enhanced system. “They now see the value of participating,” says Taylor.

“Most specialists in the Puyallup area are now participating in the network using Clarity,” says Mohler. The next step is to work with hospitals in Pierce County to improve discharge

transitions by bringing discharge summaries into the system. In addition, Summit View is participating in a new multi-payer pilot of patient-centered medical homes and expects to use the Clarity system as the core of its communication network with specialists and hospitals. The clinic is adding a registered nurse care coordinator to work with patients recently discharged from a hospital and anticipates that all non-emergency care will soon be handled through Clarity.

### Remaining challenges

“Everything is still a work in progress,” says Mohler. Even though the goal is standardized information exchange, the staff has found that adding new partners has required some compromises and adaptations to the data elements that are exchanged. “Each group wants something a little different,” she said, and as new types of specialists are added, a new standard set of data is developed. “Fortunately, Clarity is easily customizable, with drop down menus,” she added, for selecting the specific information to be included in the referral.

Clarity is also standalone software, although it can work with any electronic health record via “cut-and-paste,” minimizing the need for duplicate data entry. For clinical partners without electronic health records, Clarity still supports fax communications (in both directions), although the eventual goal is to eliminate faxes and exchange all information electronically. The era of seamless electronic health information transfer among clinical partners is just beginning, and Summit View Clinic and its partners are on the cutting edge of this new frontier.

### For more information

For more information on this article and to suggest other topics for Quality Improvement Tip-In, contact Lance Heineccius at [Lance@wsma.org](mailto:Lance@wsma.org). ■