How HIPAA-compliant texting has been a lifesaver for staff at Newark Beth Israel Medical Center

Although Newark Beth Israel Medical Center was on the road to implementing HIPAA-compliant texting before the pandemic, this tool became a lifeline during the COVID-19 crisis.

In a May webinar hosted by *Becker's Hospital Review* and sponsored by TigerConnect, Charles Cathcart, MD, chief medical officer at Newark Beth Israel, shared his organization's experience with communications technology before and during the pandemic.

Five insights were:

1. The way hospitals get in touch with doctors has evolved. Dr. Cathcart remembers when hospitals needed to call doctors' homes to reach them during off-hours. Then, pagers were developed that provided better one-way access, followed by the huge improvement of cellphones. "If you wanted to give [doctors] more information, you could send an email to their phone," he said. Texting was even more convenient, but HIPAA restrictions created risks. HIPAA-compliant texting solves those challenges.

2. Early adopters illustrated the power of HIPAA-compliant texting, laying the foundation for future applications. "Our surgical residents were just using [texting] like gangbusters," Dr. Cathcart said. "It was an easy way for them to communicate with one another in or out of the hospital. They were all on the same page, all day, every day," in communicating about the patients they were taking care of.

As the new medical director at Newark Beth Israel, Dr. Cathcart took the lead in promoting TigerConnect to his attending physicians. He soon realized it wasn't just good for doctors. This communication application worked well for other team members, too. "I knew nurse managers, case managers and medical records staff often had to get answers right away from doctors as well," he said.

3. The initial COVID-19 wave forced creation of a new operational structure. Newark Beth Israel had its first COVID-19 patient March 13, 2020, and by March 24, the hospital was inundated. "We set up groups where an ICU doctor was overseeing four regular doctors," Dr. Cathcart recalled. "Then, we had our ICU nurses, regular nurses and CRNAs [as part of care teams]. We had to break down into smaller units, so that we could have control over what we were doing."

4. TigerConnect became the lifeline for those teams. Text messaging groups were established through TigerConnect. "We put together teams that were talking to one another in those pods so that they could always be in touch about their patients," Dr. Cathcart said. "TigerConnect was a lifeboat; it was the way to talk to a large group of people that needed to know things minute-by-minute so that decisions could be made."

5. This communication model has now evolved to be broadly used. "Our patient-centered rounds is a multidisciplinary approach that works to get patients to the next level of care, whether that's their home, a nursing facility or rehab," Dr. Cathcart said. "One problem we have is that our patients stay too long. All patients want to get home, but we needed to help our case managers, nurses and doctors get patients out." TigerConnect keeps everyone on the same page and keeps the patient's care moving. "It's been successful," he said. "Our length of stay in these units is going down."

As more areas of the hospital hear about and begin using TigerConnect, even more are requesting access to this tool. Newark Beth Israel is expanding its use of TigerConnect to the ICU and to infection control, with more areas to follow. "The practitioners are happy with it, and we believe it leads to more and better continuity of care," Dr. Cathcart said.

To view the session, click here.