Chettinad Health City Medical Journal
Volume 15, Issue 2 - 2026, Pg. No. 1-3
Peer Reviewed & Open Access Journal

Editorial

The Rise of Patient Activation and Shared Decision-Making: Redefining the Future of Healthcare

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DOI: https://doi.org/10.24321/2278.2044.202608

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How to cite this article:
Raja D. The Rise of Patient Activation and Shared Decision-Making: Redefining the Future of Healthcare. Chettinad Health City Med J. 2026;15(2):1-3.

E d i t o r i a l

Healthcare has undergone a remarkable transformation over the past few decades. Traditionally, healthcare delivery followed a paternalistic model in which doctors made decisions on behalf of patients, assuming that medical expertise alone was sufficient to determine the best course of treatment. While this approach undoubtedly contributed to many advances in medicine, it often overlooked an equally important component of healthcare - the patient's values, preferences, and lived experiences. Today, this scenario is changing rapidly with the emergence of patient activation and shared decision-making [SDM], two complementary concepts that place patients at the center of healthcare. Together, they represent a shift from "doing things to patients" toward "working with patients" to achieve better health outcomes.

Patient activation refers to an individual's knowledge, skills, confidence, and willingness to manage their own health and healthcare effectively.[1] Highly activated patients are more likely to seek health information, adhere to treatment recommendations, engage in preventive behaviors, and communicate openly with healthcare professionals. Shared decision-making, on the other hand, is a collaborative process through which clinicians and patients jointly make healthcare decisions after discussing the available evidence, potential benefits and harms, and the patient's personal values and preferences.[2] Rather than diminishing the clinician's expertise, SDM integrates scientific evidence with what matters most to the patient.

Evidence consistently demonstrates that patient activation is associated with improved health outcomes and lower healthcare costs. Individuals with higher levels of activation are more likely to participate in health-promoting behaviors such as regular physical activity, healthy eating, medication adherence, and routine preventive screenings.[3] They also tend to experience fewer hospital admissions and emergency department visits, contributing to more efficient utilization of healthcare resources.[4] Importantly, patient activation is not an innate characteristic but a dynamic process that can be strengthened through education, counselling, motivational interviewing, digital health tools, and continuous support from healthcare professionals.

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Shared decision-making further complements patient activation by ensuring that healthcare decisions align with patient priorities. Medical decisions often involve multiple reasonable treatment options rather than a single universally "correct" choice. For example, selecting treatment for early-stage prostate cancer, choosing between medical and surgical management for chronic conditions, or deciding whether to initiate long-term preventive medication requires careful consideration of individual preferences alongside clinical evidence. SDM enables patients to weigh these options in collaboration with their doctors, resulting in decisions that are more acceptable and sustainable.[5]

One of the most significant benefits of SDM is improved patient satisfaction. Patients who actively participate in treatment decisions report greater trust in their healthcare providers, improved understanding of their illness, and reduced decisional conflict.[6] When patients understand the rationale behind management plans, they are also more likely to adhere to prescribed treatments. Consequently, healthcare shifts from episodic disease management toward continuous partnership in maintaining health.

The digital revolution has further accelerated patient activation. The widespread availability of online health information, wearable devices, smartphone applications, telemedicine, and patient portals has empowered individuals to monitor their health in unprecedented ways. Patients can now access laboratory reports, schedule appointments, track blood glucose levels, monitor blood pressure, and communicate directly with healthcare providers through digital platforms. Artificial intelligence-powered decision support systems and personalized health applications are likely to further enhance patient engagement in the coming years. However, this increased access to information also presents challenges, including misinformation, varying levels of health literacy, and unequal digital access across populations.[7]

Health literacy remains a cornerstone of effective patient activation. Patients cannot actively participate in healthcare decisions if they struggle to understand medical terminology, treatment options, or risk communication. Healthcare providers therefore have a responsibility to communicate in clear, understandable language, verify patient understanding through techniques such as teach-back, and provide culturally appropriate educational materials.[8] Improving health literacy is particularly important in low- and middle-income countries where disparities in education and access to healthcare persist.

Despite its many advantages, implementing shared decision-making in routine clinical practice is not without challenges. Time constraints during outpatient consultations remain one of the most frequently cited barriers. Clinicians often perceive SDM as requiring additional consultation time, although evidence suggests that the increase may be minimal when integrated efficiently into routine practice.[9] Furthermore, many healthcare professionals receive limited formal training in communication skills, risk communication, and SDM techniques during their undergraduate or postgraduate education.

Healthcare organizations also play a critical role in promoting patient activation. Institutions can foster patient-centered care by developing decision aids, incorporating patient-reported outcome measures, encouraging multidisciplinary care, and creating environments where patients feel comfortable asking questions. Decision aids including brochures, videos, and interactive digital tools—have been shown to improve patient knowledge, reduce decisional conflict, and increase participation in healthcare decisions.[10]

From a public health perspective, patient activation extends beyond individual clinical encounters. Community-based education programs, peer support groups, digital monitoring platforms, and family engagement all contribute to strengthening patient activation at the population level. Medical education must also evolve to prepare future healthcare professionals for this changing landscape. Communication skills, empathy, motivational interviewing, behavioral change counselling, and shared decision-making should become core competencies across undergraduate and postgraduate curricula. Simulation-based learning, standardized patient encounters, and reflective practice can help clinicians develop these essential skills alongside scientific knowledge.

The future of healthcare is unlikely to be defined solely by technological innovation or pharmaceutical breakthroughs. Instead, it will increasingly depend on meaningful partnerships between healthcare providers and patients. As precision medicine advances, treatment decisions will become even more individualized, making patient preferences indispensable components of clinical care. Artificial intelligence may assist clinicians in generating evidence-based recommendations, but it cannot replace the nuanced understanding of patient values that emerges through genuine dialogue.

Patient activation and shared decision-making are not simply emerging healthcare trends; they represent a fundamental transformation in the philosophy of care. By empowering patients with knowledge, confidence, and opportunities to participate in decisions, healthcare systems can improve clinical outcomes, enhance patient satisfaction, optimize resource utilization, and strengthen trust between patients and providers. Achieving this vision requires commitment from policymakers, healthcare organizations, educators, and clinicians alike.

ISSN: 2278-2044
DOI: https://doi.org/10.24321/2278.2044.202608

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ISSN: 2278-2044
DOI: https://doi.org/10.24321/2278.2044.202608