

Launching Unified Clinical Communication

New initiative to consolidate communication platforms

Send an email or a text? Call the office phone? Leave a message in Teams? Use a walkie-talkie? Alert a pager?

Kettering Health clinicians and staff currently have more than a dozen options to communicate with each other. This can lead to confusion. And trying to monitor so many platforms isn't the best use of time.

We want to make it simpler and faster for clinical teams to share information. To make that a reality, Kettering Health launched the unified clinical communications project.

Defining unified clinical communication

This multi-year project was designed to reduce the number of communication platforms that teams use.


Albert Bonnema, MD

Albert Bonnema, MD, chief medical information officer for Kettering Health, says the goal is to consolidate clinical-related communications to three primary avenues:

- Calls to work phones
- Messages in Epic In Basket
- Messages in Epic Secure Chat

With fewer devices and softwares to keep track of, clinical teams and providers can communicate and collaborate more efficiently. "Timeliness is vital, especially for certain conditions like heart attacks, strokes, and infections," Dr. Bonnema says. "Minutes, and often seconds, make a big difference."


Mohammed Abdelaziz, MD

Mohammed Abdelaziz, MD, a hospitalist and Kettering Health's associate chief medical information officer, adds that unified clinical communication has the potential to enhance care quality. "Errors are often traced to miscommunication, so improving this will result in better outcomes for our patients."

Epic Secure Chat

The first significant change is the rollout of Epic Secure Chat, a HIPAA-compliant tool within the electronic medical record that allows providers to exchange messages in real-time.

When a team member asks a question about a specific patient, for example, that patient's chart is linked to the message. "Messaging within the Epic ecosystem negates the possibility of confusing which patient you're talking about," Dr. Abdelaziz explains. "There is no reason to leave the EMR and log into a different platform. It makes for a better experience for everyone."

All clinical and non-clinical staff can use Secure Chat to send messages to individuals, or teams can communicate in group chats. Messages may also be forwarded, and users can set an availability status and a default message. Images and video links are also supported.

All Secure Chat messages are purged after seven days, so they are not part of the patient's permanent medical record.

"Secure Chat allows colleagues to ask questions or give the type of updates that would normally be shared on rounds, in the hallway, or at the nurse's station," Dr. Bonnema says. "It is not always possible to be in the same place with the entire care team, and it can be hard to connect with providers who are seeing patients back-to-back. Secure Chat bridges that divide."

Epic Secure Chat went live in mid-November. Clinical staff can send messages from desktops, and physicians can access it via the Epic mobile app.

An on-call scheduling solution synced with Epic

The unified clinical communication project also includes a more efficient on-call scheduling solution, in the works to debut in 2025.

"The new system will be integrated into Epic," says Greg Stanton, RN, chief nursing informatics officer for Kettering Health. "Staff will be able to see who is available within the EMR. They won't need to look elsewhere."

Dr. Abdelaziz emphasizes that the on-call finder tool will update in real-time. "By clicking on the treatment team, you can see if a specific provider is on call. If they're not, the system will display who is covering that shift."

Simpler, faster communication

The unified clinical communication project is intended to improve operational efficiencies, and increasing mobile capabilities is a key component. To help, Kettering Health plans to distribute iPhones to facility-based clinical departments.

Stanton explains that "physicians will continue to use their own devices. For all other clinicians, we'll provide Kettering Health-owned phones that staff members will check out from a local charging bay using a tap-badge system. The phone will already be prepped and logged into the Epic apps."

The goals of unified clinical communications include expanded telehealth and remote monitoring services. "We'll be able to do virtual nursing," Dr. Abdelaziz says. "For example, a bedside nurse could ping a remote colleague for help identifying medications or help with a procedure."

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Barcode medication administration could also be managed from the phones. "Right now, clinicians have to carry these scanners around. Going forward, they'll be able to do it all from one device," says Dr. Bonnema.

"Unified clinical communications will also help with urgent alerts," Dr. Bonnema adds. "Alerts will be right on your phone."

Staff can expect updates about unified clinical communication projects in the coming weeks and months.

Scan this QR code for more information about Epic Secure Chat, including tip sheets, FAQs, and how-to videos.

Note: You will need to log in using your dr number and computer password.