



TELEHEALTH EBOOK

10 Nurse Advice Line Best Practices

Proven Strategies for Providing a
Care-Enhancing, Cost-Cutting Nurse Advice Line

Carenet Health[®]



Introduction

The pressure to provide high-quality care at a lower cost has never been greater. The shift to value-based care, nurse and physician shortages, inappropriate ER and urgent care utilization, and escalating consumer demand for more convenient care are making the situation even more complex for health plans and providers alike.

A comprehensive telehealth solution with a results-driven nurse advice line (also called nurse triage service) can help healthcare organizations overcome these challenges while delivering better care for less.

First, a quick definition

A nurse advice line is a health information and triage service offered by healthcare organizations, such as health plans, hospitals and doctor offices, to their members and patients. A nurse answers health-related questions virtually via telephone or other communication channel, assesses reported symptoms, and recommends the most appropriate treatment, clinical resources and care setting (e.g., home, virtual consultation, retail clinic, doctor's office, urgent care, ER).

The scope of services can vary greatly from low-touch offerings covering basic member needs and accreditation requirements to high-touch services that measurably impact clinical, operational and financial outcomes.

In general, nurse advice lines offer:

- Symptom assessment and triage
- Urgent and non-urgent care advice
- Health and wellness education, reminders and resources
- Condition, procedure and treatment explanations
- Medication information, including drug interactions, appropriate use, and adherence benefits and strategies
- Program, provider and facility referrals

A more comprehensive nurse advice line may also provide:

- Seamless link to virtual consultations with medical doctors and behavioral health specialists
- Benefit explanation and eligibility
- Care management, disease management and health coaching program enrollment
- Appointment scheduling with recommended in-network providers and facilities
- Transportation coordination and/or driving directions to appropriate care settings
- Pharmaceutical solutions such as lower-cost medications and mail-order service
- Communication with on-call providers on behalf of members/patients

Benefits of a high-quality nurse advice line

By ensuring healthcare consumers receive the right level of care at the right time and place, an effective nurse advice line can:

- Improve care access, coordination and quality
- Elevate service delivery, quality and speed
- Reduce stress, anxiety, confusion and risk
- Increase education, engagement and compliance
- Improve utilization of healthcare benefits, resources and dollars
- Decrease unwarranted urgent care and ER use and associated costs
- Boost satisfaction, retention and acquisition
- Satisfy accreditation and certification requirements

Why nurse advice lines are increasing in importance

Nurse advice lines have long been a cornerstone of demand-management programs. Today, they are becoming more important due to numerous factors, including:

Higher accountability and incentives

The industry's move from a fee-for-service to a pay-for-performance model has led to higher accountability and incentives for payers and providers to improve care access and quality while managing risk and decreasing costs.

Rising demand for healthcare support and clinical care

The United States is facing an unprecedented demand for healthcare support and clinical care due to population growth, an aging baby boomer population, an increasing prevalence of chronic disease and changing healthcare delivery models. Demand is also being driven by the shift from passive patients to active healthcare consumers as Americans become more responsible for cost-sharing and decision-making and more equipped with technology to better manage their health.

Growing physician and nurse shortage

Researchers are predicting the nation will face a shortage of up to 120,000 primary and specialty physicians by 2030. Projections also suggest that the nation will see an uneven distribution of nurses by 2030; some states will have surpluses of nurses while other states will experience shortages.^{1,2} Key factors driving provider scarcity include the rising demand for care, a growing and aging U.S. population, and a retiring provider workforce—one-third of all currently active doctors will reach the age of 65 in the next decade. Their decision of when to retire could have a significant impact on supply.³





Avoidable ER utilization

While it's commonly believed that avoidable ER utilization is an issue among the Medicaid, Medicare and uninsured populations, it's also a problem with privately insured patients. A recent study found that nearly 60% of all annual visits to the nearly 750 hospital emergency rooms analyzed were made by patients with at least one of six prevalent chronic conditions (asthma, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, diabetes, heart failure, hypertension and/or a behavioral health condition). In addition, the analysis found that approximately 30% of the ER visits were for issues that could have been treated in primary care settings. The cost-savings opportunity? An estimated \$8.3 billion in ER costs.⁴

10 best practices for an effective nurse advice line

A pioneer in telehealth, Carenet Health has been providing care management services via our award-winning nurse advice line for 30 years. Hundreds of healthcare organizations—including commercial, Medicare and Medicaid health plans, hospital and provider systems, employer groups, and the U.S. military—have entrusted Carenet with the health and well-being of their millions of members and patients worldwide.

By combining in-depth clinical knowledge with deep healthcare consumer engagement expertise, Carenet has established a collection of best practices for ensuring optimal service delivery and outcomes from a nurse advice line provider. **Following are 10 key benchmarks.**

1 | URAC health call center accreditation

URAC accreditation is an evaluative, rigorous, transparent and comprehensive process in which a nurse advice line provider undergoes an examination of its systems, processes and performance by an impartial external organization (accrediting body). It ensures that the provider's nurses perform the

clinical aspects of triage and other health information services in a manner that is timely, confidential and includes medically appropriate care and treatment advice.

URAC accreditation, which is valid for up to three years, adds value to a service provider's program by promoting quality improvement and providing an external seal of approval.

2 | NCQA health information products (HIP) certification

The National Committee for Quality Assurance's (NCQA) Health Information Products (HIP) certification program evaluates organizations that insurers select to perform duties (e.g., nurse advice line) delegated in connection with NCQA Health Plan Accreditation.

Nurse advice line providers undergo a stringent review process, which may consist of both an on- and off-site evaluation. A committee of physicians analyzes the findings and assigns a certification level based on the provider's performance against NCQA's high standards.

NCQA's demanding requirements encourage organizations to continuously enhance their quality. To maintain certification, organizations must undergo a survey against the standards at least every two years. NCQA-accredited health plans receive automatic credit toward their own accreditation survey when they work with a certified HIP provider.

Third-party accreditation and certification ensures all stakeholders, including members/patients, payers and providers, are protected.

3 | Experienced, licensed registered nurses

There is much inconsistency among State Boards of Nursing regarding whether it's within the scope of practice for licensed practical nurses (LPNs) and licensed vocational nurses (LVNs) to triage patients by telephone. A nurse advice line provider adhering to the highest of standards employs only experienced, licensed registered nurses (RNs) who are specially trained to conduct telephone triage and operate under conditions of uncertainty with limited sensory input.

With higher education and hands-on clinical setting experience, RNs are typically more experienced at crisis intervention and functioning well in high-pressure, time-constrained environments. They are thoroughly trained to use sound judgment and strong critical-thinking skills whether triaging on the ER floor or on the telephone.

4 | A work-from-home model

Employing a work-from-home model enables service providers to tap into a nationwide pool of nursing talent. This is key for:

- Recruiting RNs who are best suited for telephone triage
- Ensuring adequate staffing despite a national nurse shortage
- Scaling operations more easily as business needs evolve
- Creating redundancy—allowing the nurse advice line provider to maintain service levels by re-routing work-flow as needed (e.g., during inclement weather)

5 | Positive, empowering nursing culture

Because of the intense, high-stress and emotionally demanding nature of their work, burnout is a common syndrome among nurses—one that can greatly detract from the quality of care given.

Along with the challenges inherent in caring for others, burnout is also influenced by organizational practices governing a workplace. Therefore, it's imperative that nurse advice line providers implement company policies that foster a healthy nursing workforce such as senior leadership mentoring, emotional support resources, manageable work hours and workload, shared decision-making and professional development opportunities.

About the registered nurses at Carenet Health

Caretet recruits only unrestricted licensed registered nurses with a minimum of three recent years of clinical experience working with patients of all ages in acute or ambulatory care settings including emergency rooms, intensive care units and medical-surgical areas. Our nurses average more than 15 years of clinical experience and five years of telehealth experience.

Once hired, we provide our nurses with intensive initial and ongoing training to further expand their knowledge and skill set, including training on URAC standards, state and federal regulatory requirements, HIPAA, technology advances and client-specific programs.

After successfully completing training, our nurses work from their certified home office. This is an attractive benefit that offers flexibility, especially for RNs transitioning their career from a hospital setting. Although our nurses work independently, we have processes and rewards in place to ensure they are always fully supported and know that they are a part of our entire clinical team, including 24/7 management support.

Did you know?

Caretet nurses can even contact on-call providers on behalf of members/patients for time-sensitive requests, such as a prescription refill for a diabetes medication, which can prevent an unnecessary ER visit.

6 | Around-the-clock service

Medical needs don't fit neatly into daytime hours. The most effective nurse advice lines provide assistance 24 hours a day, seven days a week, 365 days a year. This ensures that patient needs are addressed immediately, resource utilization is improved and preventable readmissions are reduced.

It also meets growing consumer expectations for the same level of access, control and flexibility that they've become accustomed to with other industries like retail, entertainment and banking.

7 | Multiple, modern communication channel options

When it comes to healthcare consumer engagement, a one-size-fits-all approach is a thing of the past. Today's digitally enabled, value-focused and time-crunched consumers expect multiple communication options and personalized, unified interactions across the full spectrum of service providers, including healthcare organizations.

Although the majority of nurse advice line encounters still occur via telephone, the most successful organizations utilize multiple communication channels to engage and support consumers via their preferred method of communication.

A high-quality, progressive nurse advice line should enable consumers to interact with nurses from anywhere, at any time, using any device and across all channels, including telephone, chat and secure email. By unifying and centralizing communication channels on one seamless platform, healthcare organizations can:

- Meet expectations for personalized, consistent and efficient experiences across their preferred channels
- Avoid overlap, repetition and conflicts between channels
- Escalate members/patients seamlessly from one channel to another
- Eliminate operational silos and inefficiencies
- Optimize multi-channel engagement strategies

8 | Use of an efficient callback model

The most effective nurse advice lines utilize a nurse callback model. With this method, a specially trained, non-clinician care coordinator answers the call first to capture the caller's question or concern and collect personal information, such as name, age, gender, telephone number and location.

Presenting problems are ranked according to specific criteria, and callers with urgent medical needs are immediately escalated to a nurse for triage. All other callers requiring nurse attention are placed in a queue to receive a call back from a nurse within an average of 30 minutes.

Often, a wide range of needs can be easily met by care coordinators, such as help with provider referrals and benefit eligibility.

Front-end support by care coordinators, who should possess exceptional communication and interpersonal skills, results in more efficient use of clinical resources—ultimately saving everyone time and money while elevating the experience.

9 | Evidence-based, physician-approved guidelines

The use of evidence-based, physician-approved guidelines to triage and direct members/patients to the most appropriate care setting ensures consistency and clinical accuracy. These protocols enable nurses to present essentially the same questions and recommendations as a physician. They also help nurses collaborate with callers and family members to enhance their understanding of conditions and treatments, increase compliance and facilitate positive clinical outcomes.

Use of trusted clinical resources means nurses can provide the most appropriate, personalized recommendations and information needed to support the best patient decision-making.

TIP | Carenet uses the evidence-based guidelines provided by Schmitt-Thompson® Triage Clinical Content and a robust healthcare knowledge-base powered by Healthwise Connect.®

10 | A formal in-house quality program

To assure the highest level of care recommendations as well as patient safety and satisfaction, a nurse advice line provider should have a formal, comprehensive quality program that focuses on both organizational performance and individual experience. A well-defined, consistently implemented program demonstrates dedication to quality and superior service and minimizes risk.

A robust quality program should include both quality management and quality assurance processes. A good model for a provider to have in place would be one that mirrors URAC accreditation standards and NCQA certification requirements.

Utilizing objective, systematic measurements, a nurse advice line provider can continually evaluate and refine processes and systems to deliver the highest-quality, most efficient and safest service.

A more modern take on telehealth and nurse triage: the virtual clinic

Carenet has created the industry's most comprehensive telehealth solution that seamlessly integrates our award-winning Nurse Advice Line with proven virtual MD and behavioral health services.

Our 24/7 Virtual Clinic provides immediate, convenient access to high-quality clinical care with upfront triage by our team of registered nurses, who are highly experienced in communicating via virtual channels.

While more than 46% of the cases supported by our RNs are resolved with at-home treatment, when patients require a medical doctor, psychiatrist or therapist, our nurses connect them with these critical resources for a consultation by telephone, online video or mobile app from the comfort and convenience of wherever they live, work or play.

The traditional telehealth model separates the nurse line from virtual doctor consultations, whereas Carenet's fully integrated approach offers a more cost-effective, efficient member experience.

To encourage higher telehealth utilization, some health plans are even offering our Virtual Clinic to members with no consultation fee.

Common medical conditions diagnosed and treated via virtual consultations range from the flu, colds and allergies to skin rashes, sore throats and sinus infections. Recommended treatment plans include prescribing medications, when necessary. And, every interaction is secure, confidential and HIPAA-compliant.

Because our unique virtual care model features upfront nurse triage, we ensure consumers are guided to the right care setting at the right time. The result: better care access, increased safety, improved resource utilization, greater cost-savings and elevated satisfaction.

Join forces with an experienced partner

Carenet has extensive experience implementing hundreds of full-service nurse advice lines—on time and on budget. We're experts in seamlessly integrating our technology and team with our clients' systems, processes and workforce. In addition, we leverage our proprietary Intelligent Engagement™ model to guide our custom-developed telehealth solutions—an approach to all kinds of healthcare consumer engagement that combines the best of human connections, data, advanced technology and clinical capital.

To learn more about our comprehensive Virtual Clinic solution and all of our best practices—including our benchmarks for account management, program implementation, security, reporting, marketing and more—**contact us today**.

Carenet Health Nurse Advice and Triage Performance

\$111 M

in annual
client savings

82%

of members/patients
directed to non-
emergent resources

46%

of cases resolved
with at-home
treatment

96%

patient
satisfaction score

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4. *Yahoo Finance*. (Feb. 7, 2019). Premier Inc. Identifies \$8.3B Savings Opportunities in the ED with More Preventative and Coordinated Ambulatory Care. <https://finance.yahoo.com/news/premier-inc-identifies-8-3b-164900526.html>

Carenet Health

Engaging. For the better.™

ABOUT US

Carenet Health is a leading provider of healthcare engagement, clinical support and health advocacy solutions, and 24/7 access to medical care. Our engagement specialists, care coordinators and registered nurses support more than 65 million healthcare consumers on behalf of 250+ of the nation's premier health plans, providers, health systems and Fortune 500 organizations. Our mission is to drive market-leading consumer engagement outcomes through our proprietary Intelligent Engagement model—an approach made up of 22 finely tuned elements that strategically align for exceptional results.

HOW CAN WE HELP YOUR ORGANIZATION?

Email us today at
marketing@carenethealthcare.com,
call 800.809.7000 or learn more at
carenethealthcare.com.