



Institute for  
Healthcare  
Improvement

## A Focus on 'Always Events'

*Strategy ensures patient-centered care and a better patient experience.*

Healthcare leaders are beginning to shift their attention from patient satisfaction scores to improving the overall experiences of patients and families. Forward-thinking leaders focus on bettering their patients' experience over time by improving care transitions and coordination and customizing care to match the unique values, needs and preferences of patients.

*It is virtually impossible for any health organization to be truly person and family centered without the commitment of its leaders.*

Whether they call them users or consumers, clients or shoppers, businesses all over the world typically spend enormous amounts of time, energy and resources on improving the customer experience. These businesses increasingly treat their customers as rich sources of ideas and input. At a time when healthcare providers are working hard to make the most of scarce resources and reduce waste, many are overlooking arguably the most underused of all the assets available in their system by failing to partner with patients and families.

The National Quality Forum's set of Serious Reportable Events in healthcare are often referred to as "Never Events." Few would disagree that incidents such as performing surgery on the wrong site or a death caused by a medication error are not only tragic and harmful, but they should never, ever happen. On the flip side, the Institute for Healthcare Improvement is promoting "Always Events," providing clarity about what *should* happen for every person, every time when they encounter the healthcare system.

### What Is an Always Event?

The IHI Always Events framework is a strategy to help healthcare leaders identify, develop and achieve reliability in a person- and family-centered care delivery process. An Always Event is a clear, action-oriented and pervasive practice or set of behaviors that provides the following:

- A foundation for partnering with patients and their families
- Actions that will ensure optimal patient experience and improved outcomes
- A unifying force for all that demonstrates an ongoing commitment to person- and family-centered care

Always Events, originally conceived by The Picker Institute (see sidebar on page 81), are aspects of the patient experience that are so important to patients and families that healthcare providers must perform them consistently for every patient, every time. An Always Event meets the following criteria:

**Important:** Patients and families have identified the experience as fundamental to their care. This specification is designed to ensure that any event that is successfully implemented will have a meaningful impact on improving the patient experience.

**Evidence-based:** The experience is known to be related to the optimal care of and respect for the patient.

**Measurable:** The experience is specific enough that it is possible to accurately and reliably determine whether or not it occurred. This specification is necessary to ensure that Always Events are not merely general aspirations but are translated effectively into operations.

**Affordable and Sustainable:** The experience can be achieved and consistently sustained by any organization without substantial renovations, capital expenditures or the purchase of new equipment or technology.

This specification acknowledges the financial challenges of many organizations and encourages them to focus on leveraging the many opportunities to improve care that are based on changes in practice, not infusions of capital.

Examples from organizations that have developed and implemented Always Events demonstrate that a wide range of initiatives are possible.

UnityPoint Health (formerly Iowa Health System), Des Moines University and Health Literacy Iowa developed a suite of tools called “Always Use Teach Back!” Healthcare providers can use these tools to confirm they have

explained information in a manner understood by their patients. The Teach Back method is used successfully when a patient can repeat care instructions to the provider using his or her own words.

University of Pittsburgh Medical Center’s Transplant Guardian Angels provide patients and families in the organ transplant program with accurate, real-time updates and clinical information, reducing anxiety and increasing effective communication between care delivery teams.

UCSF Medical Center’s Partner with Me staff customize care provided to patients diagnosed with dementia based on information

obtained by communicating with family members about the patient’s preferences and routines.

Dartmouth-Hitchcock Medical Center in New Hampshire uses the acronym “ALWAYS” as a framework for six observable, patient-centered communication behaviors: **Address** and refer to patients by the name they choose, not their disease; **Let** patients and families know who you are and your role in the patient’s care; **Welcome** and respect those defined by the patient as “family”; **Advocate** for patient and family involvement in decision making to the extent they choose; **Your** name badge, make sure patients can read it; and **Show** patients and families

the same respect you would expect from them.

“SMART” is an acronym for Symptoms, Medications, Appointments, Results and Talk With Me. Anne Arundel Medical Center, Annapolis, Md., envisions SMART Discharge as a way to ensure these five key areas are always addressed with patients and families during hospitalization and at discharge.

### The Role of Leadership

It is virtually impossible for any health organization to be truly person and family centered without the commitment of its leaders. The Always Events framework asks leaders to do the following:

- Describe the purpose of the Always Event. The reason it’s being developed becomes the organizing focus for the teams’ work.
- Align with other organizational goals by linking the Always Event to the organization’s mission and strategies.
- Convey the purpose to everyone in the organization. Make it clear how each person—from parking attendants and room cleaners to physicians and nurses—contributes to the

patient and family experience and outcomes.

- Allocate resources to support the design and implementation of Always Events. Improving communication between care providers, patients and family members should not be costly. Still, leaders must allot sufficient time, energy and staffing resources to put an Always Event into practice.
- Model appropriate person- and family-centered behavior with patients, families, staff and providers.
- Seek input directly from patients, families, staff and providers about the progress of implementing an Always Event.
- Make sure that both process and outcome measures are part of the evaluation of an Always Event.
- Be transparent about successes and failures and the impact of either on patients and families.
- Develop skills in all leaders to coach teams in identifying, testing, implementing and spreading new improvements in care processes and in acquiring new behaviors to partner with patients and family members.

- Consider all data collected, including patient stories, as having invaluable lessons that can nurture a learning culture.

### No Substitute for Leadership

Too often, healthcare improvement efforts focus exclusively on what is wrong with healthcare rather than building on what is already done well and focusing on how to do it consistently. Leaders, however, can set the right tone by helping their organizations reframe their discussions about person-centered care in a positive, collaborative way that builds relationships between and among patients, families, staff and providers.

Leaders can use Always Events to send the message that making care more person and family centered is the key to addressing some of today’s most challenging issues in healthcare, including reducing avoidable readmissions, improving care and communication across the continuum and improving patient safety. ▲



Hayward

*Martha Hayward is lead for public and patient engagement at the Institute for Healthcare*



Endo

*Improvement. She can be reached at [mhayward@ihi.org](mailto:mhayward@ihi.org). Jo Ann Endo is communications specialist at IHI. She can be reached at [jendo@ihi.org](mailto:jendo@ihi.org).*



Rutherford

*Patricia Rutherford, RN, is vice president at IHI. She can be reached at [prutherford@ihi.org](mailto:prutherford@ihi.org).*

The Picker Institute launched Always Events in 2009 to spur advancements in patient-centered care. Through research and consultation with patients, families, providers and experts, The Picker Institute developed and refined the program and transferred the initiative to the Institute for Healthcare Improvement in early 2013, when Picker ceased operations. More information on Always Events may be found on IHI’s website at [www.ihi.org/AlwaysEvents](http://www.ihi.org/AlwaysEvents).