

POLARIS HEALTH DIRECTIONS ASSESSES 1,000 CARDIAC PATIENTS NATIONALLY

In the field of behavioral health assessment, Polaris Health Directions can justly be called a pioneer. Directed by a research team that began in the 1980s developing computer-based patient assessments and modeling, Polaris is able to provide clinicians with information about key behavioral health variables such as depression, anxiety, substance abuse, and mental health history as they enter and progress through treatment.

In the medical field, how psychological variables (depression, for instance) relate to physical health is an area of growing concern to doctors: numerous research studies have shown a link between better behavioral health and better patient treatment outcomes. Thanks largely to companies like Polaris Health Directions, physicians are increasingly able to assess their patients' behavioral health status and compliance with treatment in the context of medical treatment.

In 2004, as part of a federally funded program, Polaris Health Directions began a series of cardiac patient assessments, gathering data from a thousand patients in hospitals and clinics around the country. Some of the information was gathered by phone but, to give the respondents an Internet option, Polaris used Key Survey.

Key Survey looks good and is very easy for even an unskilled respondent to use.

“Some of the factors in why we chose Key Survey were ease of use and presentation,” said senior associate Sherrill Lord. “A lot of people in our assessment might only use a computer for email, and many are older, so it had to be really easy to use and the question/response format had to be easy to follow. Also, because we were asking about highly sensitive or personal information, the system had to be reassuring to patients that it would be answered confidentially. We needed a nice, clean, professional-looking presentation, as opposed to something people might not be as confident about.”

About a quarter of the 1,000 respondents chose to answer online, with the others communicating by phone – but the phone interviewers themselves used Key Survey as an efficient tool to enter the information they gathered.

Key Survey is a great tool for electronic surveys – and for phone interviews.

“We ask about symptoms of depression and anxiety,” Lord said. “And we ask about recent developments in their treatment, such as have they been to the ER. And now, we’re

asking more questions about the kinds of activities they can do, any limitations that they might have – for example, can they climb stairs. We’re asking about their prescriptions, whether they’ve been in any kind of counseling or therapy, have they complied with the medications their doctor or cardiologist prescribed, have they taken them regularly; have they implemented any lifestyle changes that their doctor recommended.”

With this kind of information, a very important concern for Polaris was patient confidentiality. Federal law – HIPAA, the Health Insurance Protection and Accountability Act – requires precautions be taken, and Polaris handles this by assigning each patient a unique ID number for their Key Survey responses. The auto fill feature means that a patient doesn’t have to be aware of their identifier; when he responds to the survey email sent to him, the number is embedded in the link and filled in automatically. It’s then included with their responses, so that when the data is moved to Polaris’s own records, the number can be automatically associated with the respondent’s actual name and file.

Medical records are confidential. Key Survey is secure.

“It’s all stored on our secure server,” Lord said. “It’s nice to be able to say that the information isn’t available anywhere online that would be accessible to anyone else. I’m pleased with the security levels.”

And although Polaris uses a number of Key Survey’s features, Lord never had the slightest trouble learning how.

“What learning curve?”, she asked. “It was easy. Obviously there were particulars that I had to learn, but it’s just so straightforward. It took me a couple of hours to figure out what I needed to do and how to get it done, but I dare say that really I could have learned most of what I needed to know to design the assessment in half an hour. The questions we ask are multiple-choice, more complicated ones with jump logic, branch on range, things like that – that took a little more work. But it’s still very simple.”

Key Survey is very easy to use. And if you have any questions, tech support is right on hand.

“The LiveSupport staff were wonderful,” she said of Key Survey’s tech support. “I’m extremely pleased with them – they’ve stayed with me until my question is answered and my problem solved. That’s great for me because I’m not a technical person; working with them, they sometimes suggest things that lead to solutions that I wouldn’t come up with. I wouldn’t have known that that option existed for dealing with the problem.”

Once the information is gathered, Polaris exports it from Key Survey to a csv file and loads it into their own database. The information is then made available both in aggregate

statistics, so that institutions and researchers see trends, to help with Polaris Health's own computer modeling – and to the individual doctors.

View your results in Key Survey – or export the data in just about any format you like.

Having this sort of information gives doctors another way of seeing whether their patient is or is not improving. Cardiologists deal with heart problems, not mental health – but because of the link mental health does have with physical health, it's important for the doctor to have some idea where their patient is, emotionally and psychologically. That way, they can prescribe medication if needed, or refer a patient to a medical health practitioner.

Use Key Survey to gather information quickly and conveniently – and process it securely!

“We're able to provide the respondents – the patients – with a very easy-to-use assessment that they can take in the privacy of their own home at their convenience,” said Lord. “And then turn it around and provide physicians with information about their patients. “With the help of Key Survey,” she says, “we're putting valuable patient information in the doctors' hands in a very timely fashion.”