

Colonoscopy Capacity Map Among the Tools Towner County Medical Center is Using to Improve CRC Screening Rates

Interviewees: Mallory Sauer and Megan Gathman

Challenge

Towner County Medical Center (TCMC) is located in rural north central North Dakota. Patients often travel up to 50 miles to reach the clinic, while tertiary centers are two hours away. This distance and the complexity of arranging colonoscopy procedures including multiple appointments, completing a colonoscopy prep, and requiring a driver, posed a challenge. Additionally, tertiary facilities had colonoscopy wait times exceeding a year, leading to patients decreased commitment to or forgetting their appointments altogether.

Action

To address these challenges, TCMC implemented several strategic actions:

- **Standing Orders for Colonoscopy and Cologuard:** Nurses at TCMC can order these tests for any patient, average or high risk, following an algorithm to determine the appropriate test. The health maintenance tab for each patient also indicates if a colonoscopy is required per the patient's personal or family history.
- **Colonoscopy Capacity Map:** TCMC is encouraging clinics in the surrounding area who do not perform colonoscopies to utilize the North Dakota Cancer Coalition's Colonoscopy Capacity Map. Using this tool, patients can find facilities within their preferred driving range and availability. As the current wait time at TCMC is 1-2 months, referrals from outside agencies are already flowing in.
- **Efficient Scheduling:** Initial appointments are often combined with pre-op consultations to save time and costs. Providers look for opportunities to combine appointments to further streamline the process.
- **Increased Colonoscopy Availability:** Colonoscopies are performed twice a month, with eight procedures a day by Dr. Mark Peterson, a visiting endoscopist. Recently, Dr. Brant, General Surgeon, joined the team and is able to offer additional surgery days including colonoscopy.
- **Quality Improvement Efforts:** TCMC is a member of ScreeND, Blue Alliance and Roughrider High Value Network. All these programs support the clinics' effort to improve colorectal cancer screening rates.

- Outreach: Mallory Sauer, Clinic Manager and Patient Care Coordinator, recognized the need for very intentional outreach to patients and carved time to make personal phone calls to patients identified as due for screening. “I find the phone calls to be much more personal than a letter,” Mallory explained. “People respond well. I was able to assure full schedules for colonoscopy for a full year, simply by reaching out and offering patients the opportunity to be screened within a short period of time.”
- Affordable Prep Options: TCMC’s standard colonoscopy prep protocol costs approximately \$90 at the local pharmacy, but they do offer alternatives such as MiraLAX/Dulcolax prep that can be purchased over the counter to accommodate cost concerns.

Results

These actions led to measurable improvements:

- Top Performer: TCMC boasts high screening rates across multiple programs including being the leading performer among Blue Alliance Clinics in their category. They also did a short quality improvement project between August and December of 2024, increasing their rates among Medicare patients from 68% to 72%. Their ScreeND Program Performance shows an 18.77% relative improvement across all patients 45-75 years of age.
- Word of Mouth: The clinic’s reputation continues to grow, attracting referrals from outside providers, particularly from the Devils Lake area and surrounding smaller facilities. Megan Gathman credits the Colonoscopy Capacity Map, “patients can use the map to see where they can get in for colonoscopy in a timely manner. We let other providers in the area know that we are participating in it and are seeing our number of referrals from surrounding facilities increase.”

Sustainability:

To ensure continued success, TCMC plans to:

- Maintain Patient Outreach: Continue reaching out to patients via phone, reminder letters and birthday cards for patients turning 45 to remind them they are due for screening.
- Support Underinsured Patients: Refer uninsured and underinsured patients to the North Dakota Colorectal Cancer Screening Initiative.
- Advertise Availability: Inform outside facilities of their capacity and availability.
- Utilize the Colonoscopy Capacity Map: Leverage this tool to increase the number of screenings and revenue.

TCMC's proactive approach and dedication to patient care have significantly improved access to essential procedures for their rural community, setting a benchmark for other rural healthcare providers.



Towner County Medical Center Staff – Dress in Blue Day, 2025.