

Automating for Growth

Colorado specialty practice uses IT to automatically capture documentation and to cut documentation time requirements in half.

When any business is in growth mode, it requires information technology to help it keep pace with burgeoning business needs. A specialty medical practice is no exception.

PROBLEM

Gastroenterology of the Rockies is an eight-physician group practicing at multiple ambulatory surgery center facilities in Boulder County, Colo. We first opened our doors in 1984 and grew steadily through the 1980s, but it wasn't until the late 1990s that demand for our outpatient services went into overdrive, stimulating expansion from one to three (and soon four) separate offices.

By automating our procedure documentation and coding workflow, we reduced time spent on paperwork and administration, increased throughput and redeployed much-needed technical and nursing staff. This allowed us to accommodate for rapid growth without sacrificing patient care or adding staff.

By 1998, it became clear we needed to overhaul our procedure documentation workflow to keep up with increasing demand for services. We had followed the traditional mode of nursing and operative procedure documentation for years. From start to finish, nurses spent an average of 40 minutes per case on paperwork, recording vitals, tracking pathology specimens, recording lab results, logging medications, scheduling calls and correspondence, generating administrative tracking reports and retrieving procedure notes for audits. They gathered this and other procedure documentation (images taken during the procedure or handwritten doctors' notes) and did their best to keep all of these papers together—important for proper billing and regulatory compliance.

Doctors would perform a procedure such as a colonoscopy or endoscopy and then dictate notes that were sent to an outside transcription service. Finally, transcripts were sent to a coder and on to billing. The process could take days and sometimes weeks if coders needed additional information from doctors. It was an inefficient use of staff time, and we knew we risked losing control of administrative and staffing costs if we did not take steps to streamline our workflow.

SOLUTION

In 1999, we began evaluating technology tools that would help us automate. The choice came down to two contenders: an instrument vendor that also sold a documentation software package, and Minneapolis-based ProVation Medical, a developer of procedure documentation and coding compliance software.

We based our decision to go with ProVation on a number of factors. Although it was more expensive upfront, we believed ProVation would offer a greater return on investment over time. Also, we felt the company offered a more complete package with both nurse and physician systems, a superior user interface and intensive on-site service. Finally, our decision was influenced by references from local doctors who were already using the system.

IMPLEMENTATION AND TRAINING

We decided to install ProVation MD and ProVation RN software at our two newest facilities, in Longmont and Lafayette, Colo. The first step was a site analysis, during which a vendor representative evaluated procedure and recovery room layout and required hardware. Requirements included Dell workstations, a Windows NT

server, a color laser printer, a modem, and cabling to and from our surgical instruments. After the analysis, the representative performed remote project management, working closely with our clinical and IT project managers.

At both sites, we took delivery of the software within 30 days. After network cabling was laid, a ProVation representative arrived on-site to install the software on the servers and workstations, and to complete integration to our surgical instruments (e.g., colonoscopes, endoscopes) and vitals monitors. The installer was present for the first two days after go-live to oversee the technical transition, and then remained for several days coaching and teaching as we used the product for our first live procedures. All of our end-users were trained at this time. Three weeks later, the consultant returned for more advanced end-user training and a new workflow analysis and adjustment. The implementation and training cycle was completed in less than 90 days.

SOURCE

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PRODUCT/COMPANY

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WHAT WORKS: WORKFLOW AUTOMATION

Here is how the system works. During each procedure, the ProVation RN software collects data automatically from our vitals monitors, eliminating the need for paper charting by a nurse. Other items requiring documentation are quickly selected and entered through a series of menus specifically configured to mimic our workflow and force capture of compliance-required information.

Immediately after the procedure, the practicing physician uses the ProVation MD software, running on a wireless laptop, to electronically create and sign a billing-ready note with attached images taken during the procedure. The software automatically generates the correct CPT and ICD-9 codes, as well as all accompanying documentation, like referring physician letters, patient instructions and pathology reports.

RESULTS

From June 2001 to June 2002, we performed approximately 2,350 procedures at the Longmont and Lafayette sites. From July 2002 to July 2003, that number increased by more than 63 percent, to 3,739. Our workflow is now so streamlined that we have been able to accommodate this growth with ease.

By automating, we saved approximately 20 minutes per procedure on paper charting and documentation, a timesaving of about 50 percent. Due, in part, to the nursing shortage and in part to increased demand for services, we have changed our recovery nurse-to-pa-

tient ratio from 1-to-2 to 1-to-4. However, because nurses aren't charting on paper, they now spend more time with patients.

We have also changed our scheduling for routine procedures. During procedures, nurses no longer have to manually record vital signs, log medications or print specimen labels. This has all been automated. As a result, we now schedule five minutes to 10 minutes less time for our most commonly performed procedures. On a daily basis, this means that we are able to treat two or three more patients at each office.

We have redeployed the technicians previously required to be present at all procedures. Because our surgical instruments and vitals monitors interface seamlessly with the documentation software, technicians are no longer required in the procedure room. Instead, they focus on the cleaning, handling and tracking of surgical instruments, and now assist with pre- and post-patient care.

Patients benefit from the extra nursing time, and they appreciate being able to walk out the door with personalized aftercare instructions. Referring and associated physicians are very pleased with our documentation system that includes color photographs readily available at the completion of every procedure.

For more information about ProVation MD and ProVation RN from ProVation Medical, go to www.provationmedical.com or call 888-952-6673.

HMT