



A Prescription For Advising Doctors

Take 'To' Technology and You Won't Have to Call Me in the Morning

By Lisa Kianoff, CPA.CITP

It was inevitable. And it has come at a time when the news seems to tout a new medical breakthrough almost daily that average Joe Patient expects his physician to be using all the latest technology when it comes to his personal health and care. Can you judge a physician solely on his or her medical skills or knowledge base? Not anymore.

For the medical practitioner — your client — that means keep wait times to a minimum, be able to access medical history and information at the touch of a key, simplify the process of ordering and filling prescriptions, and get those results back quickly. That is, if you want to keep the patient's blood pressure in check and cure any apprehension that this physician's office is behind the curve on the use of technology. So let's consider how today's medical practice can really deliver to its customers (patients) and benefit from being on the leading (not bleeding) edge of technology.

The physician's office is like any business that benefits from greater integration of systems: Delivering services more efficiently and effectively means touching more clients and bringing in more revenue. It starts with the **BACK OFFICE SOLUTION** or what we traditionally think of as the accounting system — the likes of QuickBooks, Peachtree, Great Plains and MAS 90. This is the business side of the medical practice, the part of most interest to practitioners but rarely seen by the patients. To varying degrees, these systems address the medical manager's need to track performance of different areas of the practice, how physicians carry their share of the practice and which locations get more traffic. This information drives staffing decisions, determines which locations could add more services and which services generate the most profit. This is critical to the physicians because it directly impacts their compensation.

As part of the Back Office, financial reporting is

critical to address the industry trend to compensate doctors based on their contribution to the bottom line. Done correctly, financial reporting shows revenue and costs per Doc. This allows part time Docs to be valuable members of a practice without feeling guilty if they don't want to be full time. With financial reporting tools like FRx, you can see data from

HERE ARE SOME GREAT RESOURCES

- **MEDICAL GROUP MANAGER'S ASSOCIATION**, known as MGMA (www.mgma.org)
- **CENTER FOR HEALTH INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY** — a project of the American Academy of Family Physicians (AAFP). The Center collaborates with government, industry and other professional organizations to apply health information technology (HIT) to improve patient care and safety, and to increase the efficiency of healthcare delivery (www.centerforhit.org)
- **CTS** is a service that independently reviews software. Medical is one of its focus areas. To get medical software comparative information go to www.ctsguides.com/medical-method.asp

all different angles and bring clarity to the process of making sound business decisions. (See my column, "Financial Statements: An Often Unused Tool," from *The CPA Technology Advisor's* January/March 2006 issue.)

An extension of the Back Office is a **TIME AND ATTENDANCE** system where workers clock in and out for lunch, breaks and when they leave for the day. This automates the cumbersome process of tracking overtime, sick time, vacation and other pay issues, and provides control and flexibility in an industry where salaries are a significant expense line item. A Time and Attendance system can also capture time by department and feed the general

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ledger payroll information in a way that managers can view payroll expenses at a much more detailed level for better analysis. The latest in time clock systems is biometrics, using a thumb or handprint system. This eliminates the “clock me out” request from a friend and returns control to the medical manager. The time clock can also be a computer terminal where employees log their time.

What the patient sees in the physician's office is the **FRONT OFFICE OR PRACTICE MANAGEMENT** system. A good one can keep satisfaction high. These systems provide scheduling, billing, insurance filing and management, accounts receivable, payment processing, and more. Numerous choices are available, including major players and some great smaller companies such as ADS, GE Medical Systems, MediSYS, MedMD, Misys, NextGen, WebMD, etc. Front Office systems can also integrate with phone systems to automate reminder calls to patients to avoid open time slots during the day from no shows or last-minute cancellations that can negatively impact revenue. It is also a great value to the patients who appreciate the reminder.

Of course, the greatest value to the medical practice is when the systems integrate and talk to each other. Linking **FRONT OFFICE** and **BACK OFFICE** means the end of manual entries and the achievement of tying together cash receipts, accounts receivables, general ledger and accounts payable for patient refunds. Although some systems do both the Front and Back Office pieces,

inevitably you give up more functionality in one area or another. You can serve your clients best when you integrate two strong systems. Just be sure when you begin evaluating the link that the data is configured similarly in both systems so you can reap the greatest reporting benefits.

So what else does the patient see? In some medical practices today, the physician enters the exam room toting not just the stethoscope, but also a device that might make you think you are dealing more with a computer geek. It's no longer so unusual to see PDAs and laptops in the examination room. Configured properly, they can access a patient's medical history and allow real-time entry into their records, often eliminating the “old fashion” manual medical transcription. When the nurse takes your blood pressure, the doctor knows immediately how it compares to past readings. That helps detection of problems. And that's just a start. The next medical professional that treats you (even if it's at night, on a weekend or in a hospital) is making decisions based on full knowledge of your medical history. With the federal government requiring security in medical records (per HIPAA, the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act), wouldn't you have better peace of mind knowing your medical records are readily available whenever (or wherever) you might find yourself seeking treatment?

All of this is part of today's growing technology area of **ELECTRONIC HEALTH RECORDS (EHR)**. Although health services are all about high tech for medical

problems, using technology to strengthen performance in other areas is still relatively new. I must admit that my “geek” side was impressed when my doctor pulled out his PDA during my last checkup. My past history was just a click away. No more flipping through the pages and pages of data in my chart to find the vitals or trying to translate another doctor's scribbles from a year ago. An EHR changeover definitely requires change in doctor and employee attitudes and behaviors. This is where you can come in and help them “see the light.” The benefit increases with greater adoption since often patients see multiple doctors in a practice.

Other little quality of life features, such as electronically sending a prescription to the patient's pharmacy before you even leave the office, can really keep the patient satisfied. Couple these tools with patient ability to check test results through an automated phone system, and everyone wins. If you have clients in the medical field, or are interested in expanding your practice into this niche, you can provide great value in guiding them through the process to add more technology to the medical practice. It makes sense economically, legally and, most important, from a patient health and satisfaction perspective. Everyone wins. So be proactive and be there to help. ■

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