

Rural Clinics Reap Benefits of Technology

By Crystal Nolan, MHA, FACMPA
Principal
Derry, Nolan & Associates



Frequently a sea of paper charts, cluttered work areas and staff that appear to be anxious (probably because they are unable to find a patient's chart, lab results or any number of other documents) awaits me in the majority of medical clinics I encounter as a medical practice consultant. Recently, two rural health clinics, however, pleasantly surprised me with the *sounds of silence* as I approached their reception areas. Both clinics had adopted technology tools, such as Electronic Health Records (EHR), to streamline their work flow, decrease errors and promote operational efficiency. The staff at these clinics

appeared calm, composed and professional, because they were not frantically searching for elusive documents.

“Both (rural) clinic sites are excellent examples of ‘patient-centered’ care in action.”

Crystal Nolan, MHA, FACMPA
Principal
Derry, Nolan & Associates

According to the Centers for Disease Control & Prevention (CDC), the nation has seen notable progress toward the goal of EHR implementation. Between 2005 and 2006, the percentage of office-based medical practices using any form of EHR increased by 42%. The same article states that physicians in the West (42.3%) were more likely to use EHRs than those in the Northeast (23.5%), Midwest (29.3%) and South (24.2%). Physicians in metropolitan areas (30.3%) were more likely to use EHRs than were those in non-metropolitan statistical areas (20.2%).¹ So while finding this type of technology in areas like Seattle or Tacoma would be expected, to find

early adopters (one clinic implemented EHR in 1998) in two rural areas of our state is laudable. Both clinic sites are excellent examples of “patient-centered” care models in action. They devoted considerable monetary resources, not only on an EHR, but also on professionally designed websites that are easy to navigate, interactive and informative.

The medical practice assessments Derry, Nolan & Associates performed for these clients showed EHR adoption and using the internet as a patient resource has proven truly beneficial to the clinics. The physicians at both sites were not only at or above the 75th percentile in productivity (benchmarked against Medical Group Management Association data), but also had excellent accounts receivable (A/R) and days in A/R ratios. The fact that these two rural health clinics offered appointments, office policies, patient education, payment mechanisms, prescription refills and registration through their websites added to the success of their internal operations and financial viability.

Continued on next page

Continued from prior page

Both clinics also had overhead and staffing ratios that were very favorable thanks to the efficiencies resulting from the EHR and the internal communication systems in place. Bottlenecks at the front desks were nearly unheard of because patients pre-registered and completed health questionnaires before arrival. Electronic telephone messages were prioritized by colored flags, numbers and cues, especially if the message was time sensitive. The clinical teams used the EHR to generate prescription forms, radiology and lab requests; often the clinical visit was documented before the next patient was roomed.

At a time when many clinics are experiencing decreasing revenues, rising expenses (primarily associated with labor resources and supplies), these two rural health clinics are thriving primarily as a result of their adoption of technology. And, their staff appear happy to come to work; positive team dynamics and high employee morale permeate both office environments. Isn't this the type of environment that every clinic administrator dreams of managing?

Generally, to reach such a goal involves planning and promoting a vision, usually requiring a physician champion to overcome the apprehension associated with capital outlay, address the learning curve impacts and mitigate the fear of choosing the wrong EHR, knowing such an error could impact the physician's practice patterns for some time.

An EHR and an interactive website are long-term investments connecting the clinical and business side of operations. When these physicians made the decision to use technology to improve their outcomes and internal operations, they were confident they would be able to demonstrate the value of the changes. Both rural clinics related to me that they felt the successful implementation of the EHRs was due to taking the time to anticipate changes, such as the initial data input required, and including other physicians and staff in the selection and implementation process.

When technology is fully functioning to the satisfaction of physicians, staff and patients, any clinic undertaking this investment should anticipate having similar outcomes—seeing more patients with less

staff, enhanced internal and external communications, reduced errors in managing patient care and maybe even getting home on time for dinner!

Crystal Nolan is a Principal with the healthcare consulting firm Derry, Nolan & Associates, LLC. (www.derrynolan.com) The company is a healthcare consulting firm that specializes in business improvement strategies for large and small private physician groups, hospitals, and integrated health systems. Ms. Nolan can be reached at Crystal@derrynolan.com.

¹Centers for Disease Control, Advance Data, Vital and Health Statistics, Number 393, October 26, 2007.

Caring
for your practice so you can
care for your patients.



Derry Nolan & Associates healthcare consulting methods deliver proven results in:

- Interim management (CEO, COO & Director Levels)
- Leadership reorganization & recruitment
- Practice Management Operational & Financial Assessments
- Coding (Billing) Audit & Revenue Cycle Analysis
- Ambulatory Surgery Center (ASC) Development

Our free, one-hour initial consultation is the first step to improved operational and financial health. Call 425.774.4893 to schedule yours now.



DERRY, NOLAN & ASSOCIATES, LLC