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January/February 2009

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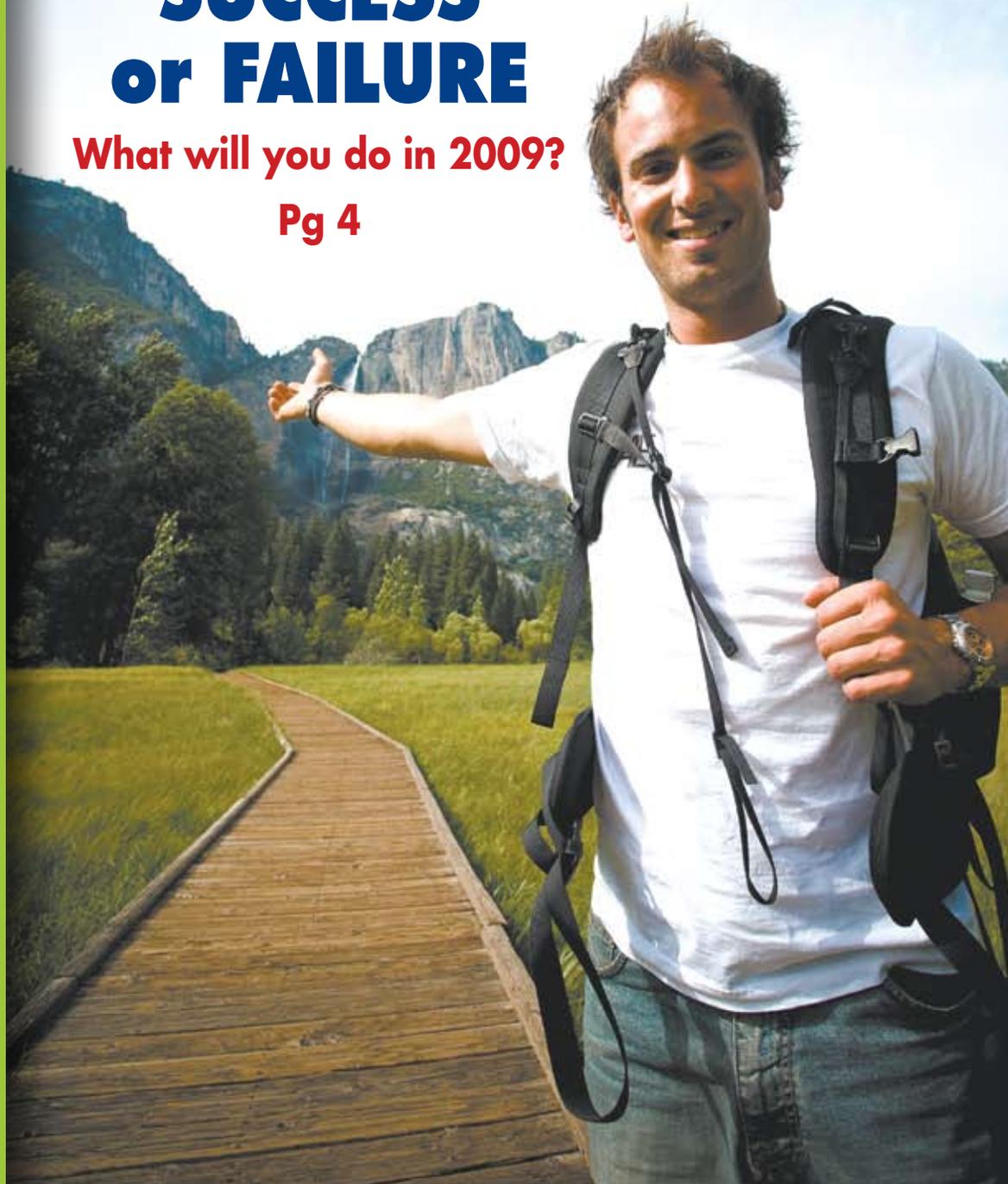
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3RD time's the charm:

Pennsylvania-based specialty practice turns to shared-service model to overcome release-of-information (ROI) challenge

Traditionally, administrators at medical practices, clinics and outpatient facilities have dealt with release-of-information (ROI) processing in one of two ways: struggle through the hassle of handling them in-house or outsource the entire process. Orthopedic Associates of Lancaster has seen the worst of both and was ready for a new solution to managing ROI requests.

The Situation

Our practice has ten orthopedic surgeons and five physician's assistants, typically serving about 200 patients per day. And as is likely the case at most medical practices, many of us hold multiple responsibilities. I oversee patient education, HIPAA privacy efforts, telephone systems and reception, and the worker's compensation program. But it was in my role as the supervisor of medical records that I truly felt the impact of the ROI problem we were facing.

ROI requests at Orthopedic Associates of Lancaster are primarily related to subpoenas, disability or worker's compensation. Practices that fail to respond promptly to such requests can face legal consequences, and admittedly there were times when requests had passed their 30-day deadline. Aside from the legal consequences, the primary

motivator in finding a solution to the ROI processing problem was to maintain a superior standard of patient care and service. This includes the timely processing of all ROI requests that are received. Orthopedic Associates of Lancaster was looking for a more efficient and structured way to process the ROI requests, and through trial and error we were able to find a system that works perfectly with our practice and fits our needs.

The Challenge

We found the task of promptly processing ROI requests to be a much larger challenge than initially expected. With several dozen inquiries received each week and no dedicated medical records manager on staff to handle the load, the mountain of ROI requests continued to pile up. Despite our best efforts, we never were able to fully get caught up and stay on top of the ROI requests as they were coming in. We simply could not get the job done in-house with the current staff, but it would never make sense for a practice like ours to hire someone for such a targeted task.

As we became aware of the inadequacy of our attempt to handle the ROI requests in-house, our next attempt at resolving the ROI problem was full outsourcing to a vendor, which proved unsatisfactory

as well. The vendor assigned a person to manage scanning the requested records, processing them, managing fee collections and so forth. And of course, the vendor took 100 percent of the fees as its compensation. With complete outsourcing, one soon realizes that the service is only as good as the single person the vendor assigns you. In our case, we noticed errors that, though minor, made us feel uncomfortable with the quality of the work. Although there were no major breaches of confidentiality and no legal actions against us, we felt a general lack of control and confidence. Often, outsourced personnel tend not to have the same commitment to accuracy as in-house staff, and this was not quite acceptable in our mission of providing superior patient care and services.

The Solution

After experiencing both in-house and complete outsourcing, Orthopedic Associates of Lancaster was completely open-minded to new suggested solutions for ROI processing. When approached with the shared-services model offered by Pa.-based MRO Corporation, we were more than willing to give it a try.

Under this model, our responsibilities include the "front-end" tasks like logging the requests upon receipt, locating the relevant records, determining what information to release, and scanning into or sending them electronically into the company's ROI Online system. From there, the software takes care of the "back-office" processes through its staff and its Web-based workflow. These are the more burdensome tasks that we no longer have to handle: invoicing, fulfillment (printing or media creation and mailing or emailing), collections and receiving telephone inquiries.

By Carolyn Vack, RN, ONC



about the author

Carolyn Vack, RN, ONC is the medical records supervisor and workers' compensation coordinator at Orthopedic Associates of Lancaster in Lancaster, Pa. She has more than 25 years of experience in the field of orthopedic nursing and can be reached at cmv@fixbones.com.

With this more sensible, shared-services approach, even small- and mid-sized medical practices can easily manage some parts of the ROI process, assign the tedious work to a software and services provider and still retain some of the revenues from the fees for themselves. It allows practices like ours to outsource the hassle while still managing a consistent level of control over the important parts of the process.

The Implementation

Orthopedic Associates of Lancaster implemented ROI Online over the course of about one month. The start-up cost amounted to \$1,200, which included the cost for a scanner. But MRO took that expense from its share of fee revenues, so we avoided any cash outlay. As for ongoing costs, MRO charges a small monthly maintenance fee and retains half the ROI fees collected.

Implementation was a simple matter of giving our outsourced services vendor 30 days notice, meeting with MRO representatives to review the

mechanics of our process, and setting up a dedicated PC with the scanner. Additionally, training was not at all a hurdle as using ROI Online was easy to learn.

What made the process even easier was that we implemented ROI Online shortly after deploying an electronic medical record (EMR) system. The entire system seamlessly accommodated our transition from paper to electronic records.

The Results

With the implementation of MRO's ROI Online, we have successfully cleared up the backlog of ROI requests and even share in half of the revenue fees collected. This solution represents a win for everyone: Orthopedic Associates of Lancaster, MRO and the patients.

Additionally, this shared-services model has restored our confidence in ROI processing, as we are able to maintain responsibility and control for the aspects of the process we're interested in: fielding requests and locating records. MRO even double checks our work to ensure that the records requested are the records being transmitted.

MRO's shared services model has allowed us to finally be able to meet all of our goals for ROI processing, and I would highly recommend it to any administrator at a medical practice that is looking for a way to solve their ROI processing worries. ■

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