RELEASE-OF-INFORMATION FROM THE EMR

A shared-services approach to release-of-information processing is one way Lehigh Valley Health Network has leveraged return on its EMR investment.

By Zelda Greene, MS, RHIT | April 22, 2009 | As seen on *ADVANCE for Health Information Executives Online*

In recessionary times like these, it's even more urgent that hospitals and other health care providers find ways to maximize return on investment for existing information systems rather than pursue entirely new initiatives. In many cases, a minor supplemental investment that leverages what economists call the "sunk costs" of an established core system — like an electronic medical record (EMR) system — will yield impressive operational and financial benefits.

As EMRs have proliferated, they have combined with complementary technologies and business processes to create opportunities for revenue cycle improvement, patient satisfaction and operational efficiencies and controls.

Because EMRs create an accessible, current and comprehensive data source, release-of-information management is a natural complement. According to a 2007 EMR trends and usage survey conducted by the Medical Records Institute, automated release-of-information processes are one of the two most promising EMR-related administrative and financial applications.

Request management

Previously, when handling the release-of-information process, health care organizations had essentially two choices: Handle the process in-house or outsource. The traditional in-house approach required hospitals to dedicate staff resources to requester services, document fulfillment, invoicing and collections, while outsourcing gave over too much control to the vendor, often creating problems in accountability and, in many cases, responsiveness.

Now, a shared-services approach can use an EMR and a Web-based application to establish a logical division of labor. Borrowing the best of both in-house and outsourced methods, the shared-services approach calls for health care organizations to receive, validate and log requests, locate records and provide other front-end services. The vendor then assumes responsibility for fulfillment, delivery, collections, customer service, regulatory fee compliance and other back-end functions.

Release of information objectives

Lehigh Valley Health Network in Allentown, Pa., where I serve as administrator of health information management, has had an EMR system for almost 10 years now, gradually integrating systems and successfully driving the organization away from the traditional paper-based environment.

Wanting to leverage the data that was readily accessible, we looked at bringing release-of-information request processing in-house as a natural progression; and with an EMR as a foundation, we wanted to avoid incurring any significant costs.

Concurrently, we planned to utilize our staff more productively and reduce turnaround times for our requesters. Eliminating week-long delays was, for us, a matter of professionalism and customer service.

We had no specific reason to suspect our outsourced vendor wasn't handling requests appropriately, but with an increase in regulatory release-of-information requests, we felt we could mitigate risk with a solution that placed the controls in our hands.

Bringing it online

Few companies offered the sort of shared-services partnership we sought. Our research, though, led us to MRO and the company's ROI Online solution, which combines software and off-site resources.

We changed our release-of-information procedures. Now we separate requests into two categories: non-billable, which are patient care requests handled on site, and billable, which are processed through ROI Online. We log requests in the software, and using our EMR, we locate the required information, securely transmitting it to the MRO offices through ROI Online via simple print driver installed into our existing system.

After the Lehigh Valley staff has completed the front-end tasks, the staff at MRO takes over. They verify the information; monitor regulations that determine fees and apply them appropriately; generate invoices; track payments; verify addresses; transmit records in the required format or on the requested media; and handle phone calls from requesting parties or their record retrieval agents.

Our shared-services partner handles much of the work we wouldn't want to take on. Even if we did, we couldn't offer the advanced features Web-site requesters now use to track the status of individual requests.

Leverage equals transformation

Using this approach, we have leveraged the power of our EMR. The arrangement has allowed us to control key aspects of the release-of-information process in-house, and we only dedicate two staff members to the process. Prior to our partnership with MRO, our outsourced vendor used five on-site staff members.

Although we never viewed ROI as a source of income, it's now a modest revenue-generating department. Rather than retain all the fees collected, the shared-services provider shares revenue with Lehigh Valley. In fact, the entire project was essentially cost-neutral. Except for a few scanners we employ for the occasional paper record, we deploy all our existing resources.

We've eliminated service-related complaints, which were once quite commonplace, and our average release-of-information turnaround time was reduced from weeks to approximately five days.

Perhaps most important, we have clarity in all aspects of our release-of-information processing operation. While outsourcing, we weren't consistently aware of our release-of-information volumes, but now the system can show us the true volumes, which are higher than originally projected.

By leveraging our EMR for release of information, we have been able to apply a new model that expedites the process in multiple ways. Rather than merely relocate or duplicate the existing workflow our traditional outsourced vendor used, we transformed it.

Ms. Greene is the administrator of health information management for the Lehigh Valley Health Network in Allentown, Pa.