Taming the Release-of-Information Process

While replacing a broken release-of-information process with a high-tech, low-cost answer, a hospital finds a revenue benefit.

By Kelly Henry and Stephen Hynes
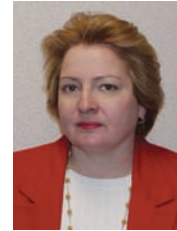
Kelly Henry   Stephen Hynes

Although the release-of-information request process may not be mission critical, inadequate management causes problems for everyone involved. Riddle Memorial Hospital in suburban Philadelphia realized several years ago that its release-of-information process needed help, and the issue was placed among the institution's top five departmental priorities.

Fortunately, the organization discovered a better business model for handling release of information, and some of the solution's benefits were surprising.

Low-Tech System Failure

Riddle Memorial, an independent community hospital, has 252 beds and records roughly 10,000 admissions, 76,000 outpatient visits, 500,000 laboratory procedures and 29,000 emergency department visits annually.

In addition to the usual release-of-information requests from the business office, physician practices, patients, health plans, lawyers, law enforcement and research organizations, the hospital also fields requests from auditors on behalf of state-mandated initiatives.

In 2004, it was obvious that the release-of-information process needed some structure. The system in place at the time was little more than a "first in, first out" method that created huge piles of paperwork.

Tracking requests in response to inquiries was extremely difficult and completely manual. Fulfilling some requests required a visit to the basement in another building. If the requesting party did not pay the bill, there was little or no follow-up, because unpaid invoices could not easily be tracked. The staff

used typewriters instead of PCs. And finally, there was no way to get a snapshot or overview of volume, statistics and status of requests.

Hospital staff members were at a distinct disadvantage simply because the process had never been updated.

A Sensible Hybrid

In revamping its release-of-information process, Riddle Memorial was not seeking to reduce staff. It wanted to retain people and give them the right tools. Realizing a financial benefit was not even expected. The primary objective was simply to gain control.

The first priority was to enhance the ability to process requests quickly and to improve efficiency by working smarter. With the right system in place, for example, the need to repeat the same request could be eliminated. The hospital also sought a way to easily investigate status requests so customers could be served more responsively. Senior leaders wanted a dashboard that would display request volumes, turnaround times, pending release of information, outstanding invoices and other benchmarks.

Though the in-house option clearly was not working, another conventional option--complete outsourcing--was not viable. Riddle Memorial wanted to own the process.

During its search for a solution, Riddle Memorial learned of a hybrid release-of-information request model with an online foundation. The hospital would still handle the front-office functions, while the vendor would manage the back office. Revenues would be shared.

This approach would let Riddle Memorial keep its people and invest in their development. The hospital would maintain control and, through the online release-of-information product, gain access to the vendor's expertise. The installation process moved forward.

Simple Startup

Today, the new process begins with Riddle Memorial staff opening the mail and immediately logging requests into the vendor's online system. This enables a request to be tracked from the moment it is received. Hospital personnel conduct the research, retrieve the relevant information and validate that it is for the right hospital, right date of service and right patient.

Using a virtual print driver from the application, selected records are captured from the document imaging system and transferred to the online system without having to print and scan. If the requested data is available only on paper or microfilm, the paper or reprinted documents from film are scanned using one of two desktop scanners.

The vendor handles the rest of the process. After confirming the information is correct, the company conducts all records distribution, either in printed or electronic format. It manages the release-of-information billing, including collections, and fields telephone inquiries from callers such as attorneys, insurance companies and record retrieval services. In addition, the vendor supplies and maintains the software at no cost to Riddle Memorial.

The hospital's online release-of-information process went live in August 2004. Implementation required only a few PCs, two scanners and the software package. Startup cost was minimal and did not require a large, upfront investment into a traditional release-of-information software package.

The only obstacle was a simple matter of training. Some staff members were not familiar with the Windows operating system. At the time, Riddle Memorial was operating in a mainframe environment, so staff needed to be introduced to some basic principles of the PC and mouse operation that regular users take for granted.

Revenue Remains Stable

Before the online system was implemented, the process was so poorly organized that hospital staff did not even know how many release-of-information requests they were processing. Now the status of every request can be tracked.

With the new hybrid system in place, the entire process is more efficient. The surprise is that despite revenue sharing, the hospital is seeing the same amount of revenue as before. The vendor's expertise in billing and collections has boosted gross revenues.

The online system has successfully transformed the release-of-information process, allowing the hospital to move on to other priorities while providing excellent customer service.

Kelly Henry, RHIT, CHP, is director of health information management for Riddle Memorial Hospital, Media, Pa.

Stephen Hynes is vice president, sales and marketing, for Medical Records Online, King of Prussia, Pa.