

Once Leery of PDAs, Agency Clinicians Now Refuse to Work Without Them

Over the last two years, Caritas Home Care in Norwood, Massachusetts has grown from two branches to four and increased patient visits by 40%. To accommodate this growth, office intake staff increased by a total of two. Data entry staff has dwindled by attrition; medical records for all four offices are managed at one location; and one person oversees physician order tracking. This is how Executive Director Maureen Kennedy Thompson responds if asked whether there have been any cost advantages gained by automating Caritas' back office and point-of-care operations with HealthWyse.

Caritas selected HealthWyse in early 2003 to replace a legacy system that was not going to be updated for HIPAA compliance. Only two years earlier, Caritas Home Care and St. Elizabeth's Home Care dba Caritas Home Care had been created through the merger of two home care agencies within the Caritas Christi Health Care System, New England's second largest. "We knew we needed better technology to get us into the future," Thompson remembers. "We required a system to help us manage 170,000 annual visits conducted by a staff of 350 and improve patient outcomes during a time of continued growth and a changing regulatory environment."

The HealthWyse system supports those goals in a number of ways, Thompson reports. It is hosted by the vendor, relieving Caritas from the twin burdens of running daily backups and installing periodic version upgrades. A clinically-oriented billing system, it makes redundant data entry unnecessary as patient information is transmitted from the field. The HealthWyse clinical application runs on handheld Pocket PCs and checks OASIS M0 answer logic to streamline the clinician's assessment experience. Nurses have found they can complete an assessment in about half the time it used to take them on paper.

Caritas Director of Finance Brian McNeil has noticed two back office benefits that can be directly attributed to the new point-of-care module. "Our Medicare case mix has increased," he reports. "I would have to guess it is due to the way the application leads clinicians through an OASIS admission, eliminating errors and omissions, and resulting in a more accurate HHRG. It has also led to a dramatic reduction, from 15 days to 5, from start-of-care to RAP submission."

Staff acceptance slow but thorough

Caritas has a number of clinicians who were previously not regular computer users, Thompson remembers. "Some were, shall we say, 'more seasoned' professionals," she laughed, "who were concerned about learning to work without paper and about the size of the PDA screen. In fact, a few did go out and get reading glasses for the first time." Today, Thompson emphasizes, none of them would consider going back. "We have to make sure we have spare PDAs on hand," she said. "If anyone has to turn one in for service, she/he will *not* go back to paper, even for a day."

Reports of process improvement from all quarters

Anne Dosch, Director of Performance improvement and Clinical IS, reports that Clinicians have gotten used to having patient information available at their fingertips, being able to look back at notes from previous visits to see patient history and what other disciplines have been doing. They synchronize at the beginning and end of each day and appreciate the ability to connect in the middle of a day should they be asked to take a new admission that cannot wait.

Administrators report advantages from the new ability to perform 100% start-of-care document review before sending 485s for signatures, even though the agency carries approximately 1,200 patients at any one time. "It is easy in the *OfficeWyse* application to review every single admission," Dosch explains, "so PI nurse/therapist reviewers can examine the 485 and OASIS and first visit notes right on the screen, to make sure documents agree with each other."

Even physicians – *even physicians* – report HealthWyse advantages. Dosch says she has been told that they appreciate the clearer, crisper 485 layout, finding it to the point and easy to understand. "They have gone out of their way to comment on what a great improvement it is," she says, sounding both pleased and bewildered.

The stories of two nurses sum up Caritas' HealthWyse experience. One thought she would have to quit working because she had small children at home but discovered she could complete her visits during school hours and finish and transmit her notes from home. "The other is an excellent nurse," Dosch relates, "who was not at all interested in change. When we introduced HealthWyse, she seriously considered leaving us until she discovered she could do an admission quicker on the PDA. Today she tells all the new nurses not to hesitate to embrace technology by saying, 'I never wanted it but now I can't imagine working without it.'"