

Bay Area Provider Finds Success with Outsource Services

Purchasing software licenses is not the only way to reap technology's benefits. Sometimes it is better to let someone else deal with the computers, freeing clinical and management staff to concentrate on their own areas of expertise. For **Sutter VNA & Hospice** (SVNAH) in Emeryville, California, such a solution has been a perfect fit.

Select Data, Inc. provides error checking and specific QI services to five of Sutter's eight Northern California offices. The other three have merged only recently with SVNAH and have existing software contracts to fulfill. Within its Anaheim headquarters, Select Data's nurses and clerical staff review each day's Assessment/Careplans for completeness and notify SVNAH when corrections are needed. "It makes a good double-check of your accuracy," says Jim Kelleher, SVNAH's Chief Operating Officer.

Accuracy has been SVNAH's technology benefit. "Our overriding measurable change since we brought in Select Data has been compliance," Kelleher declares. "Not that we were not compliant before, but their service offers a way to double check compliance and have supporting data at hand to prove it if needed." To an operations officer like Kelleher, that means peace of mind.

The system that ensures SVNAH's compliance is relatively low-tech, but by no means simplistic. Clinicians record visit data and care plans on Optical Mark Recognition and Optical Imaging forms, which are then scanned at each respective office and delivered through T1 or Internet connections to Select Data. "Many of our clinicians love the forms system," Kelleher says. "They can record the same amount of data with a lot less writing. As soon as the forms are brought to the office and scanned, all of our data is available to any authorized user within our system."

Prior to implementing Select Data's scanning system, SVNAH clinicians had paper forms using longhand to gather the same data. Branch offices used various billing software products and employed data entry specialists to transfer written records to computerized records. Kelleher remembers that both clerical support costs and data turnaround time dramatically decreased when his previous agency moved to Select Data and has every reason to believe the same will happen for SVNAH. In a system with 800 employees, he underscores, controlling support costs leads to substantial savings.

Questioned about simply replacing clerical support costs with high outsourcing service fees, Kelleher clarified that this is not the case, at least at the two agencies where he has utilized Select Data. "What they charge does not come close to what our clerical costs were previously," he asserts. "One reason is that Select Data's Clinical Document staff does the same type of QI tasks all day long and have become quite efficient at it. At Sutter VNA & Hospice we did not turn every function over to them but continue to complete the billing cycle ourselves after their staff finalizes their end of the process." SVNAH enjoys a decided advantage in this regard as its five branches that use the outsourcing services also use the same back office billing system upon which Select Data's processes operate. All the applications used are integrated.

To further increase efficiency, Select Data's complete system includes an intranet application, SAM™, which tracks physician orders for signatures and compliance dates. Kelleher remembers SAM™ working as well at his previous place of employment as it is now for SVNAH. "No task is more labor intensive under PPS than ensuring an episode is ready to bill, with all orders signed and received prior to the billing data," Kelleher emphasizes. "To be able to verify billing readiness with little more than the touch of a button saves a tremendous amount of time."

He attributes the operational outsourcing success as much to Select Data's customer relationships as its technology. "They have been quite cooperative with us," he proclaims. "They treat us more like a partner than a customer. Because of the nature of the assistance they provide, you wind up speaking with them almost every day and therefore that kind of relationship is crucial. They seem to always be available, and with the right answer at their fingertips."

A side benefit, Kelleher points out, is having complete, understandable data readily available for surveyors.

"Consistency and accuracy of the ICD-9 coding Select provides has been another plus." SVNAH received congratulatory comments last year from JCAHO surveyors about the thoroughness and readable format of reports presented to them from Select Data's software. "Incidentally," Kelleher concludes, "we received a 100% score."