

Front Desk to Back Office: Radiation Oncology Software Improves Flow

Using practice management software improved efficiency and income at one Arizona facility

By Dana Hinesly

Until someone invents a to-do list that completes itself, the next best thing is one that writes itself. For freestanding radiation oncology centers—particularly those with multiple locations—tracking work that needs to be done and employee performance is vital to success.

About 4 years ago, Arizona Oncology Services (AOS), which provides radiation oncology services at 13 facilities in the Phoenix metro area and Yuma, Ariz, installed an enterprise practice management (EPM) system from NextGen Healthcare Information Systems Inc, Horsham, Pa. Along with its myriad of functionalities, the solution generates work logs specific to each employee. These task lists are updated every 24 hours and appear on the desktop after individuals log on to the system.

Exactly what the task is and to whom it goes are determined by management. Virtually every process or procedure that needs doing in a practice can be entered into the system and assigned as appropriate. Therefore, the solution touches every aspect of the business, starting when the patient checks in.

“Until we installed NextGen, the radiation technology therapists constantly would have to go back and forth to the waiting room to see if their patient had arrived,” says Tim McKeough, chief operating officer for AOS. To minimize the wait time, therapists often were paged, presenting concerns about patient privacy. The EPM changed that: Now when the front desk checks in a patient, the therapist’s schedule is updated to show that the person is waiting. “It seems small, but the therapists thought it was great because it saves them a lot of wasted time,” McKeough notes.

Such seemingly minute efficiencies can add up quickly, especially when extrapolated to all departments. Once the patient is on the books, a task is created for the individual responsible for verifying insurance and eligibility. This job is created in real time, so within 5 minutes of scheduling, whoever is assigned to that duty will see a new item on his or her work log. Conversely, should a patient cancel, the EPM would delete any related tasks from all involved task lists.

Not only does it begin the process more promptly, but the system also flags any inconsistencies overnight. An incorrect insurance number or provider ID will be returned—as a task—to the initiating clinic for further review. Errors are remedied before weeks’ worth of billing can be produced.

Adaptability Is Key

For McKeough, another big selling point of NextGen was its open design. “The architecture was huge, because I’ve worked with systems where it was expensive and time-consuming to get a custom report,” he explains. “If I really need a number, and I just can’t find a report in NextGen, I can get it from my IT group within a couple of hours, because the infrastructure is very user-friendly.”

The tech team at AOS further capitalized on the welcoming structure of the software by developing a “patient estimator” program, used during consultations with patients about to begin treatment. The patient estimator accesses the record kept in NextGen and gathers all of the contract information from the insurance carrier for that patient. After entering the CPT codes expected to be billed during the course of treatment, an estimate is generated informing patients of the total charges and how much they will be responsible for paying.

Assessing expenses in this way works in reverse as well. “We are doing a better job of letting patients know what their balance is going to be, so it’s very easy for us to sit

the patient walks out the door, the therapist selects “bill it,” puts in the corresponding code, and saves. “Now, we’re running our date-of-service and our date-billed as almost the same day, so bills are going out 3 weeks faster than they were before.”

According to McKeough, the savings are realized in triplicate. Not only has the cash flow improved, but staff members spend less time entering charges and following up on unpaid invoices. In fact, staff productivity also is measured by the EPM. Once a task is assigned through the system, it must be acknowledged by being either completed or forwarded to a colleague. The software tracks when duties are put on a worklist, as well as when they are left unattended. Managers can create reports identifying who is doing how much and how quickly.

Having solid numbers and statistics removes all subjectivity and makes it possible for management to specifically address any issues, as well as dole out praise where applicable. “It not only gives us an idea of where we might be having a problem, but also where we might have a star performer, and it’s allowing us to put some bonus structures in place,” McKeough says. “It’s also easier for management to give people help, because in looking at what tasks are assigned every day, they can determine who might need assistance.”

The enterprise-wide facet means that tasks can be offloaded to others remotely, because all information resides on a central server.

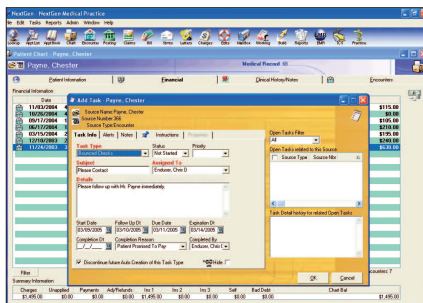
Bang for the Buck

AOS realized a return on its six-figure outlay in less than a year, according to McKeough. Although the investment might not be feasible for smaller facilities, managing 24 doctors across 13 sites makes it well worth the investment.

“When we were in front of the executive committee trying to decide which system to buy, the analogy we used was that this is the Cadillac, not the Ford Escort, of practice management systems,” he says. “There are definitely cheaper systems out there, but you have to determine what means more to you—getting the functionality you want or saving a little bit more money.”



Tim McKeough



Arizona Oncology Services achieved a return on investment on NextGen’s software within 1 year.

down and counsel them,” McKeough says. “On the flip side, we also can set up a payment plan and, hopefully, not have to send out any statements.”

The Bottom Line

In addition to minimizing the number of statements generated, the software system has noticeably increased the productivity of AOS’ billing professionals. The company has cut the number of days required to collect on outstanding accounts almost in half. Accounts receivable averages less than 40 days now, as compared to around 75 days prior to the new system’s installation. Part of the savings came from speeding the time it took to get bills out the door.

“When I first came in, I did a date-of-service to date-billed analysis, and we were running, on average, 15 to 20 days to deliver the bill,” McKeough says, noting that the NextGen system makes it easy to bill. When

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