Innovation and Risk – are you on the (b)leading edge?

Technology is always improving – giving us cool new tools that we never knew we needed, but suddenly really want. Many of these tools are great ideas that let us reinvent our way of doing things for tremendous improvements in speed, efficiency, and communication. Early adopters of these new tools often find themselves fighting through the 'growing pains' of any new process or system – mechanical or logical. How do you balance being an industry leader with protecting your patients and facility?

First you have to understand what 'tasks' you really need to accomplish and what 'rules' you need to make sure are followed while you accomplish them. For example, it would be really easy to put all patient records in an unsecure storage location and give everyone access, but that won't meet your obligations under HIPAA. There a several areas that may affect what you need to accomplish:

- Reimbursement – Meaningful Use and other factors that affect your reimbursement may require that you have certain capabilities in place. For instance, access to exam images from within the EMR – easily accomplished (if the PACS and EMR support it) with a URL link to the exam that includes login information for opening it.
- Outreach – You'll want a way to make it easy for referring physicians, specialists, and others to work with your facility while maintaining control that protects all your data from accidental corruption or deletion and limits them to only authorized exam access. Making it easier for them to work with your facility than with others makes the choice to refer to your facility easier.
- Patient Satisfaction – With the Internet and the television ads that encourage patients to suggest things for their own treatment, along with the mobility of today's population, patients frequently want to access their records from outside. Whether they want to look at the records out of curiosity, are trying to pull up information for a physician when they are away from their primary residence, or are looking at the accessibility of the information as a factor in selecting a physician or medical facility, you can encourage them to use you by providing simple, protected access.
- Efficiency – All of these factors are of little use if the system you use doesn't help your facility to make the most effective and efficient use of resources. Time is money AND satisfaction – the quicker you can treat patients and move them through the workflow, the happier they will be and the better your bottom line will be.

Next check the system that you have to determine if it has the ability to meet these needs; if there is any charge to make use of those capabilities; what training is available for it; and how soon you can start taking advantage of these items. No system can do *everything*, but you may be surprised to find that you already have many or all of the desired functions available to you. Some features may work a little differently than you had imagined and will need to be evaluated to see if that different workflow may work better for you than your initial idea.

Weigh the options. Does your existing system do all or most of what you want to do? Are there costs associated with changing your system to enable those functions that make it more affordable to switch? Does the existing system do most of what you want, plus a couple of 'nice to have' features you didn't think of previously at no extra charge? Will a new system work with your existing hardware and systems or will you lose productivity by moving forward? You may find that the system you have is better for you than jumping to the latest innovations and suffering the pain of 'working out the kinks'. Or, you may just find that you could do more for less cost and fewer pain points with a new system than by staying with the system you have.

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