

## Getting Back to Caring for Our Patients

My marriage was under stress. The overwhelming load of paperwork and billing for my practice had exceeded my capabilities, so much so that in addition to my regular staff, my wife had to step in and help. The resulting stress put significant strain on our relationship.

Chiropractors often spend several hours each evening catching up on paperwork after a long day of seeing patients. We fill out charts, reports and insurance forms, while our staff uses valuable time searching for patient notes, filing letters and claims, and pulling data. Our walls crowd with medical charts and our shelves with books of information; the chances of files being lost or misplaced grow exponentially.

In addition to clinical paperwork, dealing with billing issues and trying to sort through the multifaceted details of insurance claims takes up time. We are trained in chiropractic care and want to help our patients become healthy and whole - we are not MBAs. Unfortunately, the load of paperwork and time-consuming billing processes require more and more of our energy. In smaller practices, it is particularly easy to become mired in the billing and IT functions on top of chiropractic care.

However, there is respite for the headaches of paperwork and billing. I found a solution that reduced my work load and saved my marriage - technology. The increased availability of technology for practices has enabled many chiropractors to adopt an electronic system and "go paperless." The Center for Studying Health System Change, a nonpartisan policy research organization, cites an increase (from the years 2000 to 2005) in the number of doctors who have access to clinical IT, and who find it useful for things such as storing treatment information, exchanging clinical data with other doctors, accessing patient notes, providing preventive treatment reminders, and writing prescriptions.

In response to this growing use of IT in the doctor's office, many companies now provide practice management services, such as EMRs, scheduling, accounting and billing. But how do you choose a company to work with? And how can you ensure you will see results that you need? The following four questions helped me choose a profitable and results-oriented solution.

1. Does the solution streamline all processes, such as patient data, billing, scheduling and reporting, into one system?

There are many solution providers, each of which offers separate services; some offer billing, some offer EMR software and others provide scheduling. However, managing a variety of vendors also can distract you from your patients, especially if these systems are not compatible and require you to access each one just to retrieve complete data on a patient. Instead of this potentially confusing array of vendors, choose a solution that offers a comprehensive one-stop system with EMRs, billing, scheduling and reporting. For example, the Tacoma, Wash.-based company I chose has an integrated system for both administrative and clinical processes. Doctors and staff enter clinical, billing and scheduling information for patients into the same database and in the same manner, which creates consistency and stability for office management.

1. Will the solution allow you to give improved service to your patients?

With a paperless and fully integrated system, you will have more energy and time to devote to your patients. The number of hours spent on clinical paperwork decreases, which enables you to dedicate your skills to improving your patients' health.

In addition, all patient data, such as reports, X-rays or ultrasound images, are at your fingertips and immediately accessible to answer any questions your patients may have. My patients are impressed that I can pull up any aspect of their chart on my tablet PC within 15 seconds and the information is always legible and never misplaced. I enter information into my patients' charts electronically during their appointments. This information is available immediately and compiled for efficient use. Longer reports, such as personal injury or workers' comp claims, used to take me at least an hour to complete. Technology can cut the time to just 20 minutes.

1. Are you able to easily integrate technology?

When I began considering integrating more technology into my practice, I knew the business was ready, but I didn't think I could afford the transition. Many of my fellow chiropractors feel the same. They need to reduce their paperwork load with EMRs and billing assistance, but feel they do not have the time or resources to incorporate more technology into their practice. However, the benefits of adding technology can greatly outweigh the deterrents to doing so. I consider myself a tech-savvy chiropractor; however, I am not an IT professional and soon realized that outsourcing this element of my business was preferable, assuming I could find the right company.

The key is to find a company that will provide the appropriate pieces of hardware, such as tablet PCs, desktop computers, scanners and digital cameras. They also should install the software and offer full-time support to troubleshoot any hardware or software problems. Additionally, the vendor should provide in-depth, hands-on instruction for use of the system. It would be useless and frustrating to incorporate technology, only to have it breakdown or malfunction because of user error.

1. Do you see increased revenue after implementing the system?

Efficiently integrating technology to streamline administrative and clinical processes into a unified system will increase your revenue. Effective practice management makes administration more effective and reduces staff turnover. After I partnered with my IT provider, I was able to reduce my staff size by one-and-a-half employees. Stress levels related to paperwork and billing also were reduced. With fast and accurate billing, I now have the best collection rate I've had in 10 years. Billing is submitted daily and there is a constant revenue stream.

When you evaluate the options and choose an integrated IT system, you will have time to see more patients each day and experience a more efficient office flow, which also will increase your income. You and your staff will not waste valuable time trying to troubleshoot software or hardware glitches, and with a paperless system, supply costs associated with paper charts and billing documents will decrease.

By considering these four critical questions, it is easy to see why it's time to integrate technology into your practice. Choose a practice management system that is efficient, user-friendly and gives you the support to finally lessen your paperwork load and get you back to what you do best - care for your patients.

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