

Hospital clinic throws the book at human error

SourceMedical's TherapySource system boosts accuracy of information management, improves workflow and gives co-workers a reason to smile

Treatment for aching bones, joints and muscles is the sole specialty of the Orthopaedic Hospital of Wisconsin. The Glendale, Wis.-based hospital sees a steady stream of patients who require physical and occupational therapy. Because of high patient demand, the hospital's state-of-the-art rehabilitation clinic grew from having a handful of therapists on staff to having 16 clinicians in just a few years.

During the growth spurt, the clinic experienced problems with its manual processes for information management. Scheduling was the thorniest challenge. Patients were turning up for appointments that weren't on the books. Front-desk staff and clinicians were at odds over who was to blame.

Todd Heikkinen, director of rehabilitation services, decided it was time to toss the clinic's scheduling books in favor of a better solution: SourceMedical's TherapySource system. As a result, those errors have fallen off to near zero. What's more, the department has witnessed an 80 percent improvement in the timeliness and accuracy of therapist documentation by implementing TherapySource.

The new system also came with the unexpected advantage of ensuring complete accuracy in therapist billing and coding, says Heikkinen. He calls that fact huge and says it allows him to rest easy about the prospect of a visit from JCAHO or Medicare.

The paper-based challenge

The Orthopaedic Hospital of Wisconsin is a relatively young facility, and since they were only beginning with a staff of six or seven clinicians, the hospital's rehabilitation department chugged along with old-fashioned information management processes.

"We used paper scheduling books and paper charts," says Heikkinen. "All of our statistics were compiled manually out of the scheduling books."

The paper-based system wasn't ideal, but it worked – for a time. With each new therapist hired, however, the office began to experience an exponential increase in scheduling errors. Just eight months after opening its doors, the clinic reached a crisis point with its manual recordkeeping methods. It needed an automated information management solution, and fast.

"Front desk employees had to deal with patients who were coming in at incorrect times or whose appointments had been erased," says Heikkinen. "It created friction between patients, the front desk and clinicians. These errors triggered tense moments."

When the clinic's staff reached critical mass at about 14 or 15 therapists, the system had cracked. "The small systems just weren't working for us anymore," says Heikkinen.

"Accuracy above all else"

Heikkinen wanted a new system that would improve the accuracy and dependability of the clinic's scheduling system. He also wanted help monitoring the clinic's workflow and performance. Finally, he hoped to find a system whose reporting capabilities would allow him to provide an accurate portrait of the practice – on demand – to Orthopaedic Hospital's CEO and owners.

"My concern was for accuracy above all else," says Heikkinen. "I wanted a fail-safe system for scheduling, clinical documentation and administration."

The industry movement toward an electronic health record also swayed Heikkinen's decision. "I don't think

anyone disagrees that the electronic health record is going to be a standard feature everywhere in a short period of time," he says. "It's important not to end up so far behind that it's difficult to catch up."

After examining several products, Heikkinen selected SourceMedical's TherapySource to solve his clinic's scheduling woes and other error-prone processes. It was the only system that had everything he wanted. Some products he looked at had great scheduling programs; others had great documentation modules. But TherapySource was superior in tying all of the administrative and clinical information management aspects together.

TherapySource provides a seamless integration. What the front desk enters into the system automatically appears in the clinicians' systems and in the administrator's system. There's no duplication of data entry or room for more errors. It all happens behind the scenes electronically in one unified suite of software.

Four or five key staff members attended a TherapySource demonstration and confirmed Heikkinen's choice. As clinicians, they particularly liked the point-and-click menu system, which meant they wouldn't have to type so much.

"They appreciated being able to click boxes instead of typing sentences," says Heikkinen. "The TherapySource knowledge base is very thorough. It's rare that a clinician would have to type in a sentence that doesn't fit the normal flow of the knowledge base."

Some of the systems Heikkinen rejected had clunky interfaces that required clinicians to use a lot of

keyboard commands. "Those systems would never fly at my practice," he says. But, even after learning how to use TherapySource's intuitive point-and-click system, some clinicians at Orthopaedic Hospital began to panic as the go-live date neared.

"I underestimated the impact that computerization would have on some of my staff members," says Heikkinen.

On the go-live date, two TherapySource trainers quietly walked around the clinic, looking for people who were having trouble using with the new system. Heikkinen says the trainers were outstanding in helping the staff members become comfortable with the new interface.

The most computer-savvy employees in Orthopaedic Hospital's rehabilitation department mastered the TherapySource system within about 30 days. Non-technophiles still mastered it within 45 to 60 days. "New hires find the system a breeze," says Heikkinen, "especially since they can always ask a colleague for help."

Immediate improvements

Accuracy in scheduling and in other aspects of clinical information management has improved nearly to the point of perfection since the clinic implemented TherapySource. And, friction among staff members has eased as a result.

"Errors are obviously still going to occur," says Heikkinen, "but with this system, we can find out where the process is breaking down and deal with it."

Heikkinen has noticed improvements in clinic productivity, even though this was not an explicit goal of the implementation. Therapists who were quick on paper are "fast as lightning on TherapySource," he says. However, those who always took a lot of time to complete their paperwork still take a lot of time on the electronic system. Nevertheless, says Heikkinen, the clinic

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has seen an 80 percent improvement in the timeliness and accuracy of therapists' documentation. Moreover, the system makes it easy to monitor workflow.

"I can press a button and see who's behind on their notes instantly," says Heikkinen. "We can deal with the problem before the therapist has that dreaded moment where they realize they've got 75 discharge charts hitting their bottom drawer. TherapySource helps root out such issues before they turn into bigger problems, but with paper charts there's no way to know if somebody's beginning to drown."

As director of the rehabilitation department, Heikkinen may be asked at any time to give a snapshot of his service line's business to the CEO or other top executives. TherapySource allows him to do that. Productivity figures, referral patterns and reimbursement rates are just a few of the reports available at his fingertips.

"With TherapySource I can generate a report on anything I want to see, for any time frame, within three or four keystrokes," says Heikkinen. "The system gives me hard numbers to show exactly how the practice is doing. With a manual practice that's impossible. You'd be looking at chart audits, and only dealing with a rough estimation."

One benefit of TherapySource that surprised Heikkinen is its accuracy in therapist billing and coding. The importance of this feature is huge, he says. While working for previous employers, he always dreaded the moment when JCAHO or Medicare would come around to do their inspections. What if they pulled the one chart showing how a therapist billed four units instead of two?

"With TherapySource, there's literally zero concern over that issue," says Heikkinen. "All a therapist has to do is enter what they did with the patient. TherapySource automatically converts that into the proper billing amount. It's all perfectly done, every time."

Further Integration

After implementing TherapySource, the rehabilitation clinic decided to eliminate even more manual processes. It hired SourceMedical to build two interfaces to the main hospital system, one for medical records and one for billing.

"We were an island that was functioning well, but to get billing information from TherapySource to our hospital system was a manual process," says Heikkinen. "We also had to scan in hard copies of patient records into the hospital's medical record storage system."

These two manual processes were cumbersome. So the clinic asked SourceMedical to create electronic links to the hospital's systems for medical records and for billing.

"It was a painless integration," says Heikkinen. "SourceMedical finished the project on time and on budget. The customer often ends up being the project coordinator in situations like this, but SourceMedical took the lead and ran with it."

The first interface connected TherapySource to the hospital's document management system. Medical records transfers that once required 100 hours of labor now took only 20 minutes with the new interface. The rehabilitation clinic was so happy with the results that it had SourceMedical build a billing interface as well.

TherapySource gave the Orthopaedic Hospital of Wisconsin's rehabilitation department the accuracy and reliability it needed at a critical juncture in the clinic's growth, and they continue to realize its benefits.