



ECM Provides Coding Bridge For Hybrid Medical Records

Electronic document management software allows Tufts Medical Center to cut outsourced coding costs by more than 50% by providing coders with remote access to scanned physician notes.

By Ken Congdon, editor in chief, Healthcare Technology Online



Most healthcare facilities currently maintain a “hybrid” medical records system. In other words, they have fully or partially implemented an EMR (or several EMRs) in some areas of the hospital, but other areas or applications still rely on paper processes. Tufts Medical Center, an academic medical facility in Boston with two full-service teaching hospitals and 415 licensed beds, is no exception to this rule. Tufts currently leverages a Siemens Soarian Clinicals EMR for lab and clinical reports, but the facility’s inpatient physician notes and orders are still being completed in paper form. This hybrid record-keeping environment can create some significant challenges, particularly in the areas of coding and billing for services.

OUTSOURCED CODING DOESN'T COME CHEAP

While Tufts does employ a handful of full-time

coders, the facility has historically experienced recruiting challenges when it comes to hiring coders to make the regular commute to downtown Boston. Therefore, most of Tufts’s coding services are outsourced to coding service providers. Because paper physician documentation was required to code services accurately, these outsourced coders were initially asked to work on-site at Tufts Medical Center to complete their work.

“Bringing outsourced coders on-site quickly became a painful expense,” says Arnette Marbella, HIM and revenue cycle director at Tufts Medical Center. “We were incurring a lot of travel expenses, including putting these coders up in

hotels, that were over and above the regular hourly rates for these outsourced services.”

In an effort to control these coding costs, Tufts sought a solution that would allow coders to access electronic images of physician progress documents and orders remotely. The facility began by looking at the imaging services offered by some of the coding service providers Tufts partnered with. While these providers could provide the document scanning, indexing, and archiving service required, they lacked one critical element – control. Using an outsourced service provider to perform these tasks would require Tufts to route their physician documents to an off-site imaging facility maintained by the service providers to be scanned.

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Case Study

wanted us to maintain control of the records and the time frame in which they get scanned,” says Marbella. “A key performance indicator for us is to ensure all patient services are coded within a three- to five-day window. By routing key documents off-site, we would lose some level of control over this process and potentially add to our turnaround time. This was a risk we were unwilling to take.”

DOCUMENT MANAGEMENT SOFTWARE CREATES VIRTUAL CODING QUEUES

Since outsourced document imaging was out, Tufts began searching for an in-house electronic document management system that it could quickly and cost-effectively install in house. A vendor partner Tufts worked with recommended a software package called CNG-SAFE by Cabinet NG. CNG-SAFE provided the document imaging, indexing, workflow, and archiving functionality Tufts desired. Plus, the solution was available in a cloud-based, SaaS (software-as-a-service) format. The SaaS model allowed for quick installation with little IT involvement, and limited the upfront capital costs of the system via monthly usage fees – both of which were attractive to Tufts. However, the most compelling attribute of the system was its user interface.

“The software we selected needed to be easy to use,” says Marbella. “We didn’t want anything too sophisticated or fancy because it wasn’t intended as a replacement for an EMR. CNG-SAFE provided a familiar user interface that mirrored the look and feel of a physical file cabinet environment. Users identified with this structure and quickly became comfortable using the system. As a result, we didn’t have to invest tons of time in user training.”

Tufts installed CNG-SAFE late last year and established a centralized scanning department in-house. All physician documents for the day are scanned into the CNG-SAFE system by 2 PM. Document images are then placed into one of several virtual coding queues, each of which contain approximately 25 patient records/cases that need to be coded. The outsourced coding labor Tufts retains are then provided with a username and password that grants them remote access to one of these

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electronic queues via a secure VPN (virtual private network). The coders are also granted remote access into the Siemens Soarian system so that all information related to a patient can be captured and documented in the coding process. The coders then work on coding each of the 25 records in their queues between the hours of 2 PM and 10 PM.

While the CNG-SAFE system provided Tufts with the remote document image access it desired, the facility encountered some coder queue management issues during the first few months the system was installed. “Initially, we opened all queues to all of our contracted coders,” says Marbella. “With this

free reign coders would abandon difficult coding jobs in one queue to tackle an easier coding job in another queue. This left several records uncoded at the end of each day. To combat this issue, we have since locked down the queues so that each queue is assigned to a specific coder and that coder can only access and complete the work in its queue.”

Tufts Medical Center

THE BENEFITS OF VIRTUAL CODING

With CNG-SAFE now fully implemented, Tufts Medical Center no longer has to incur the added travel expenses required to bring an outsourced coder on-site to do the job. Coders can now perform the same work from the service provider’s offices or from home, because of the remote access they have to electronic images of physician documentation and the EMR. This new system has cut Tufts’ outsourced coding labor costs by more than 50%.

The new document management system has also improved Tufts’ chart audit and record retrieval processes. “Audits and reviews used to be a painstaking process where we had to go and physically pull paper patient records from our in-house records room as well as charts we have archived with Iron Mountain,” says Marbella. “Now, much of our more recent patient information is available electronically and we can pull patient records simply by entering a search query. This has significantly reduced the time it takes us to prepare for an audit and helps keep us compliant with key industry mandates.” □