

HealthLeaders

On the Record

Demystifying communications can improve revenue and customer service.

Health First of Rockledge, FL, like many providers, found itself playing a familiar he-said, she-said, cat-and-mouse game with insurers, says Jim Slate, vice president of revenue operations for the health system.

"They would give us preauthorization to perform a procedure for a patient and they denied the claim later, saying we didn't get the authorization," he says. "We did, but it might have been a phone conversation and we couldn't prove it. We had that happen many different times."

Clearly, they needed a solution that would prove that prior authorization had been given, because while denials weren't going to drive Health First out of business, they were putting a significant dent in revenue, as Health First's denials were equivalent to about 0.3% of a gross of \$1.5 billion annual revenue.

"That ran us in the range of \$4 million to \$5 million a year," says Slate, "plus the cost to collect involved when you appeal, including time on the back end, and you have to produce medical records, which meant a lot of unnecessary work. Even if you do get it overturned, there's additional cost involved."

Health First needed an efficient way to track and archive those phone and

fax communications so that insurance companies couldn't hold their own disorganization against the hospital. It picked Trace, a searchable, Web-based program from The White Stone Group in Knoxville, TN, that logs and tracks phone calls and faxes much as how Microsoft's Outlook catalogs e-mails.

Game over.

Michelle Fox, director of revenue operations/patient access, says some insurers played this game cynically, meaning they knew the hospital didn't have a record of the communication that authorized the service, so they knew they could get away with not paying.

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"This really cut the feet right out from underneath the managed care folks who didn't want to work with us," she says. "Once you've established that integrity in communications, the

customer knows that, so there's no more game playing. You don't have to do the battles, and they can't deceive you through miscommunication."

But collections weren't all that the new tracking system improved.

Because it records every phone call and electronic fax by date and time stamp, as well as the names of the two people communicating, it's easy to locate the trail if there is a problem with rudeness, incomplete use of scripts, or any other issue that stems from a lack of communication.

Slate and Fox lead teams that deal with scheduling or customer service issues, in addition to dealing with insurers and authorizations. Often, associates have to deal with people who tend to be less than courteous on the telephone, and who have short memories about their behavior. So they've used Trace as a behavior modification tool as well, both for associates and, sometimes, the people who call in.

"We've had clinical staff and physicians who are less than professional in their communications," Fox says. "It's surprising how this changes behavior not only when you play back what they said, but that they know you have that capability."

—PHILIP BETZE

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