Monitoring Health Reform Change at Your Medical Practice

April 23, 2012 | Healthcare Reform [1], Law & Malpractice [2], Meaningful Use [3], Staff [4], Technology [5], Operations [6], ACO [7], Billing Compliance [8], EHR [9], Finance [10]  

How to keep your practice up to date with changing healthcare policies and industry standards.

The local hospital is adopting tablet computers to help coordinate patient care. Your biggest competitor is introducing a new ancillary service that you've never even heard of. And you're still trying to figure out what it takes to meet the requirement for meaningful use. Don't despair. Medicine these days is a moving target. Between regulatory changes, reimbursement shifts, and the relentless evolution of information technology, it's a tall order indeed to keep pace with industry trends.

Like most practice leaders, Sami Spencer, CEO of the Missoula Bone & Joint and Surgery Center, a nine-provider orthopedic surgery group in Missoula, Mont., admits the process can easily overwhelm. "My reading pile is 3 feet high," she says. "There's so much to try to keep up with that I struggle with it."

Yet, stay current you must, says Judy Capko, head of Capko & Company practice-management consulting. "It is vitally important for medical practice executives and managers to keep up with industry standards to measure their own performance and identify any shifts that are occurring," she says.

E-alerts

For her part, Spencer says the professional trade associations she joined, including the Medical Group Management Association and the American Association of Orthopaedic Executives, do much of the heavy lifting for her. For the price of membership, both issue automated e-mail alerts on regulatory and health legislation topics affecting medical practices and her specific specialty. They also send out digital newsletters that aggregate information on the latest trends in patient safety, communication techniques, and office efficiency. "Those groups are a great resource for educational content," says Spencer, noting she also subscribes to FAST Practice, a monthly newsletter that focuses on practice-management strategies for success.

CMS, along with many health insurance providers, also offers free RSS (really simple syndication) news feeds containing news summaries, along with podcasts with audio and video content whenever new information is updated on its website. Topics run the gamut from submission periods for Medicare claims to new options for accountable care organizations. "E-mail alerts vary from coding changes to regulatory advisories," says Tina Housman, administrator of Mesa Family Medical Center in Mesa, Ariz., who relies on alerts to keep ahead of the curve. "I view the subject line and if I see something that may pertain to me, I open it and scan it for pertinent information," she says. "If there's something relative to my business, I read the article and save it for future reference or forward it to whomever I think it will affect — billers, supervisors, the owner."

Housman is currently filtering her inbox for alerts that help her staff get ready for meaningful use requirements. "I started prepping for registration to attest the minute the system was open for the state incentive EHR program monies," she says. "It is my understanding that we will be one of the first groups to be paid in the state." Housman also looks for e-mails related to technology upgrades, and those that can help her practice meet the criteria for the Red Flags Rule under HIPAA. "I would not otherwise be aware, working in the daily task-driven environment, and could, like most medical office managers, get behind and bogged down when faced with a system or regulatory change that I would not be prepared for," she says.

Webinars

Most state medical societies, along with the member-based trade associations, of course, also offer online seminars or webinars on a range of topics including government affairs, human resources, medical malpractice, patient safety, office flow, and cultural competency. The multimedia content provided is often more in-depth than you'll get from e-mail alerts, and webinars are far more flexible than a traditional seminar you must attend in person. "I don't always have time during the day to attend the webinar, but I can purchase it as a CD and listen to it on my way home," says Spencer.
Networking
Good old-fashioned networking, of course, at conferences and events sponsored by professional organizations, is also critical. But the Internet has made it easier than ever to connect. Dozens of user groups exist on LinkedIn and Facebook for EHR adopters, health information technology (HIT) professionals, and individuals with an interest in HIPAA compliance. Managers can read the dialogue posted by their peers, or fire off questions and comments of their own. "These are a really good resource," says Peter Polack, an ophthalmologist with Ocala Eye in Ocala, Fla. and founder of emedikon.com, a practice-management consulting firm. "A lot of times there are professionals on these sites who are well-connected and hear about policy changes even before they get finalized as regulation."

Listservs, or e-mail discussion groups offered through professional organizations, are useful for the same reason, says Spencer. "I do a lot of networking through listservs," she says. "You can pick which listserv you want to be on and manage the content that way." Some, for example, focus exclusively on HR issues, or financial matters. "I might send out messages that say, 'Hey, I'm having this problem. What have you guys done about that?'" says Spencer. Subscribers can also solicit advice on job descriptions, policy questions, or even ask whether another practice has already created a form they may need, so they don't have to waste time reinventing the wheel.

Divvy up
Staying current, of course, doesn't have to fall entirely on your shoulders. Delegate to your staff. Your billing and coding department, for example, can follow the AAPC news thread for pertinent changes to diagnostic coding. Your physicians can participate in CMS "Open Door Forums," which are conference calls that allow them to talk directly with senior policy staff about payment policies, provider compliance, and other issues related to your practice.

In the healthcare field, staying current on industry changes is a big job. It's also one that practices can't ignore if they hope to compete — not to mention remain compliant. "For me it is essential to watch, read, and listen to what is going on in my field and in politics, locally and nationally," says Housman, noting it helps her practice succeed. "That is reflected in our ability to continue to grow and meet the community needs for healthcare."

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