

Speed of Payment on Claims Has Increased Over 70%

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Lackawanna Valley Dermatology Associates (LVDA) realized its paper records system was not efficient, and payment on claims was frustratingly slow. Implementing a MEDENT Practice Management and EMR solution has enabled LVDA to improve scheduling and the handling of patient calls, achieve major time savings in billing and claims processing and increase the speed of payment on claims from 30-45 days to one to two weeks. Moving toward a paperless office has resulted in better documentation and decreased expenses on items such as file folders, labels and forms. And LVDA is confident many additional efficiencies are yet to come.

Situation

With four physicians and three physician assistants, Lackawanna Valley Dermatology Associates in Scranton, Pennsylvania struggles to keep up with demand for its services and provide the finest in patient care. The practice hasn't been able to reduce its waiting list, even though each provider sees an average of 40 patients a day. The most recent physician added to LVDA's staff is one trained to provide Mohs surgery, a microscopic surgery to treat selected difficult skin cancers. LVDA was the first in northeastern Pennsylvania to provide this specialized surgery.

Established in 1979 and housed in a main office and one satellite location, LVDA's staff of 27 includes some who remember the old pegboard system for encounter forms and others who grew up in an era of laptops, browsers and mice.

In the 1980's, LVDA's founder, Dr. Douglas Sheldon, realized that paper was not the most efficient method of maintaining patient information. "We had problems finding and retrieving the information we needed and occasionally a patient record was lost," explains Dr. Sheldon, "and we were running out of space." While LVDA considered computerizing their patient database, Dr. Sheldon didn't want the then common large, wired PCs in the exam rooms. "I wanted to wait until technology reached a level of maturity so that we could use small, mobile computers."

Through the late 80's Dr. Sheldon observed that electronic medical records were increasingly beginning to be implemented in physician practices and hospitals. He watched regulatory requirements and technology developments and waited for technology to mature and a vendor with whom he felt comfortable.

Solution

In 1989, LVDA chose a vendor and began to use the Accounts Receivable module of MEDENT from Community Computer Services Inc.. Additional MEDENT Practice Management modules and the Electronic Patient Statement feature were implemented in the 90's. In June, 2002, LVDA

began using EMR, starting with Triage, Prescriptions and Chart Central.

Lifebook wireless pen computers provided the technology Dr. Sheldon had envisioned years earlier for the exam room. LVDA got wireless pen computers for all of its office staff. They also added scanners, a digital camera and duplicate servers which provide continuous back-up to prevent loss of patient information, should a server fail. One server is located at the main office and another is remote. With its digital camera, LVDA takes digital photos of all surgical cases, and the photos are stored in the patient's electronic record.

LVDA has moved steadily toward a paperless office. Of their seven providers, currently three are completely paperless for new patients. "In terms of learning and using EMR, the youngest seem to have made the adjustment most quickly," states Dr. Sheldon.. "We've needed to get some 30 users on board. Most learned the system quickly, while several people had to work through periods of frustration and needed to persist."

"I've come to some new realizations during the implementation, and one is that electronic medical records are fundamentally not equivalent to paper charts," explains Dr. Sheldon. "Now when I look at an electronic record, it looks very good."

"Our experience with Community Computer has been very positive. As they've grown, they've added resources and been very responsive," comments Dr. Sheldon. LVDA values the fact that Community Computer ensures that all their software and hardware work smoothly together. "I know of many practices who have changed from one vendor to another," explains Dr. Sheldon, "but we've never considered changing vendors."

Benefits

Kathy Colombo, LVDA's practice manager, states, "There has been a positive impact on the front desk through use of EMR and major time savings in billing and claims processing. Also, we have much better turn-around with insurance companies." If a patient calls in and leaves a message, the message is entered into the computer triage system and reaches the provider quickly. End-of-month statements are now computer generated and electronic. Scheduling is no longer done with pencil and eraser. In addition, LVDA is beginning to see decreased expenses for such items as file folders, labels and forms.

LVDA's billing coordinator, Angie Ceccacci, describes, "Whereas it used to take 30-45 days to get payment from major insurers such as Medicare and Blue Shield, it now takes 7-14 days. Also, billing insurance companies used to take me one to two days. It now takes half an hour." The practice also finds that it's easier to track claims.

Using MEDENT's Electronic Patient Statements feature for patient billing has saved about two hours of administrative time each week. An additional benefit is that LVDA's patients report little or no confusion about their bills.

One of LVDA's goals was to better document the physical exam, an area in which they had been faulted during a previous audit. The physical exam is better documented using EMR and they've

also strengthened additional areas such as the patient history and plan.

“Moving to a paperless office is not easy, but we’re almost there,” reflects Dr. Sheldon, “and I’m confident there are many additional efficiencies yet to come.”