

Oversight Requirements Are Being Met, with Office Help Reduced Over 50%

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North Forest Medical Associates needed robust accounting software to meet government and HMO oversight requirements. Also, they were inundated with paper and wanted to achieve greater office economies. Today North Forest uses Community Computer Services' MEDENT Practice Management and EMR software which enables them not only to meet oversight requirements but also to achieve fewer errors, greater efficiency, decreased costs, high collection rates and easier documentation. Plus, they can access patient information from virtually anywhere.

Situation

Located outside of Buffalo in the suburb of Getzville, New York, North Forest Medical Associates provides general internal medicine care to 500 patients a week, ranging in age from 12 to 100. North Forest was founded by Dr. Allyn Norman in 1985. Currently the practice has one full-time and one part-time physician, two nurse practitioners, a full-time and a part-time RN, three secretaries and an office manager who also handles accounting.

One of the biggest challenges facing North Forest is oversight, both by government and HMOs. In addition to doing fee-for-service, the practice has some capitation agreements. There is a lot of review and evaluation of outcomes data.

About 12 years ago, North Forest began using accounting software from a small, local company. "As oversight in the billing and coding area increased," states Dr. Norman, "the software simply didn't have the robustness needed." North Forest used a paper superbill to code the diagnostic and CPT data but found paper very cumbersome. Also, it was difficult to get a financial overview of what had been done.

In 1995 North Forest began using Community Computer Services' MEDENT accounting software. They moved to an electronic superbill and did the coding from a workstation. The software made getting a periodic overview much easier. Paper scheduling was another area of concern in that only one person at a time has access to the scheduling book. Within a few years, the practice extended its use of MEDENT to include scheduling.

North Forest participated in an Institute for Healthcare Improvement program which focused on improving the practice of medicine, specifically in the areas of interaction with patients and how work flows through the office. Involvement in this program helped convince Dr. Norman of the value of electronic medical records (EMR). Plus, the practice was inundated with paper and Dr. Norman wanted to achieve greater office economies.

Solution

In 2000, along with MEDENT Practice Management, North Forest began using MEDENT EMR.

Today North Forest uses nearly all of the MEDENT modules. Dr. Norman uses the point and click DocGens technology and the Medical Content Library. Also, they have a patient educational system and sometimes Dr. Norman does research right in the exam room through access to sites such as WebMD from his Lifebook over the Internet. He prints out information for patients to take home. "I use this say for a diabetic or someone going on a new medicine," explains Dr. Norman, "or to help a patient understand the latest treatments in a particular area."

North Forest doesn't file any paper. Currently they scan in all reports such as EKG results. Shortly they'll be able to plug directly into their EKG machine and download the results in to the patient's record.

When they moved to EMR, North Forest updated all of their hardware. They got new desktop PCs, a new file server and wireless Lifebook notebook computers. They use a digital camera to document rashes and wounds. Also, with three and one-half providers, they've found it helpful to have a portrait of the patient in the medical record. Recently they got a mini scanner for insurance cards so that this too is part of the medical record.

Dr. Norman, who teaches a physical diagnosis class to medical students, has conducted training at Community Computer Service, and Community Computer has provided training at North Forest for new staff. Most of the North Forest staff have had their first experience with a computer upon being hired by Dr. Norman and starting to use MEDENT. "Things have gone very smoothly," says Dr. Norman.

"My overall experience with Community Computer has been great," explains Dr. Norman. "I appreciate the fact that if I have a problem I can make a single phone call and they evaluate whether it's hardware, software or networking and they solve it."

"I can't imagine having an EMR not integrated to scheduling and labs," states Dr. Norman. "MEDENT's integration is just a perfect thing. I've been in other medical offices and have seen million dollar systems which are so complicated the practice can't use it, and it's not integrated."

Benefits

North Forest has realized many benefits from their use of MEDENT, including meeting oversight requirements and achieving fewer errors, greater efficiency, decreased costs, high collection rates and easier documentation. Plus they can access patient information from virtually anywhere.

"One of the greatest impacts on the practice is reliability," explains Dr. Norman. "Prescriptions aren't misread by the pharmacist and we don't lose papers such as lab results." North Forest's providers generate prescriptions and lab requests and order x-rays directly from the exam room. With lab results being returned electronically directly from the lab company, the results are available the next morning. "Another efficiency is that at the end of a patient visit, I send a note about what needs to done," says Dr. Norman, "and I don't need to go out and describe it to each clinician and staff person involved."

North Forest has reduced costs in the area of human staffing. Originally Dr. Norman had seven and one-half administrative and clerical people, plus a full-time contractor who did transcription. Today his office staff numbers four with no outside contractors. This translates into a reduction in office help of over 50%.

North Forest's collection rate, at 94%, is one of the highest in the area. "The average nationally for internal medicine practices is 78-92%," states Dr. Norman. "If the documentation isn't there, the 3rd party payer won't pay, and most doctors are not good about doing thorough documentation. With the MEDENT templates and touch screen, it's so much easier and faster to document thoroughly."

Dr. Norman describes an additional benefit of MEDENT, "Since I'm hooked up from home via online dial-up, if a patient calls in the evening I can get the records right in front of me. I don't have to guess. And I can basically do this from anywhere."