

Uniontown Hospital & Acusis – Thinking, and Working, Outside of the Box

Healthcare executives continue to assess the options related to medical transcription. Despite the recession and increase in unemployment, quality medical transcriptionists continue to be in short supply. With the expanded use of electronic health records, an aging population, and growth of chronic health conditions, the need for quality transcriptionists remains high.

This was the situation for Karen Keniston, HIM Director at Uniontown Hospital in Uniontown, Pennsylvania. The 224 bed facility is the only provider serving a population of 155,000 within a 15 mile radius. Keniston and her team of in-house medical transcriptionists were slowly losing ground in an attempt to stay ahead of the growing demand for services in a local market that provided few quality transcriptionists.

By the start of 2011, transcriptions for consults took up to four days and the billing process was complicated by a three week backlog of discharge summaries. Keniston says, “The transcription quality was high, but the lack of timeliness caused issues with physician satisfaction. The transcriptionists also felt the burden. It was an experienced staff, working over-time and finding it increasingly difficult to keep up with the need.”

After assessing the additional staff and cost to work the backlog, Keniston and her executive team came to a conclusion – without a source for recruiting transcriptionists the situation was unlikely to improve. In April 2011 they decided to investigate outside alternatives and to have a provider in place by the end of the fiscal year in June 2011 to clear the backlog of discharge summaries.

For Uniontown Hospital, the criteria in determining which alternative to use was based on cost, proven reliability, consistent quality and a reputation for flexibility. Three outside organizations were interviewed and references reviewed for each. Acusis’ use of client-specific integration models and transparent pricing were initially attractive. Strong reviews by other Acusis’ clients using the same HIT system as Uniontown Hospital helped complete the decision. Because Acusis uses lines of transcription produced as its billing metric and the hospital used minutes of dictation, the financial analysis was not straightforward. The parties agreed to use the national average of 10 lines of transcription per minute of dictation to set the initial budget.

Rocks on the Road to Implementation

Keniston and Acusis worked through the contracting process while developing an implementation plan. A barrier soon became apparent. Uniontown Hospital’s IT department was an essential part of the plan and given the department’s competing priorities, including hospital critical projects such as CPOE and Meaningful Use, it would be impossible to have the interface with the EMR ready by June 2011.

Keniston and Acusis developed an innovative solution. Initially, they would manually transfer the transcriptions from the transcription system into Uniontown Hospital’s medical record.

Literally, cutting and pasting from one to the other would enable the new service to begin on time and start addressing the backlog of work.

“We were all excited that we had a potential solution, but wanted to ensure a high level of quality. Ultimately, to make this work would require staff that understood both systems,” says Patty Barrett, Vice President at Acusis. That’s when a new idea developed - Given their experience with the hospital, the existing transcriptionists would be the best equipped to ensure the notes were properly placed in the medical records if Acusis provided oversight and training on its system.

Acusis held a luncheon for the Uniontown Hospital medical transcriptionists. Tensions were initially high as, even for sought after transcriptionists, outsourcing is a sensitive topic. “Acusis spoke directly about the issues, but with compassion and honesty,” says Keniston. Most of the transcriptionists had been offered other opportunities within the hospital. Those that had not accepted one were offered a position with Acusis. Initially, the work would be limited to helping complete a smooth transition from one system to another by acting as a “human interface” between the two technologies. Once the electronic interface was complete, they could work for Acusis customers nationwide. Ultimately, all of the transcriptionists chose one of the two options. The quality of the medical transcription remained high throughout the transition and Acusis gained additional professionals.

With the temporary measures in place, the IT departments worked to develop the electronic interfaces. Keniston with Tricia Herman, HIT Director at Uniontown Hospital, and Acusis developed a project plan and held weekly implementation meetings. Says Herman, “The weekly meetings kept us on task to meet each milestone.” Once the interface system was active, the next priority was the dictation backlog.

With the goal of eliminating a three week backlog of discharge summaries within a month, while maintaining performance on new transcriptions, additional short-term interfaces were needed. The Acusis Project Manager Earl Schweinberg initiated development of the needed modules to complete the task. “Earl is a wizard of all things technical,” said Herman, commenting on his work. Within 30 days the dictation backlog was erased and turnaround times maintained.

Cultivating a Collaborative Partnership

A new hurdle appeared 3 months into the contract. While the expected turnaround time and backlog improvements had appeared, the projected savings had not. “It turns out that the national lines-to-minutes ratios don’t apply to Uniontown Hospital,” said Barrett, “In working to understand why the costs were not improving as quickly as they should, we discovered Uniontown Hospital’s lines per minute ratio was different then the industry standard of 10 lines per minute of speech. They were actually closer to 12 lines.”

This presented an obvious problem for the hospital executives. “We knew that using industry norms for the calculations would create a variation from the budget, but a 20% difference would require major changes,” said Keniston. Acusis worked with the hospital to review and adjust the contract to reflect the efficiencies realized using the back-end speech recognition systems. Ray Dyer, CEO of Acusis, says of the decision, “We are committed to achieving customer recognized value and ensuring our arrangements make sense for Uniontown and all of our customers.” Senior Vice President and CFO Steve Handy says “It was one of those moments that define the relationship, and Acusis showed that they truly wanted to work with us as a partner.”

Today medical transcription services at Uniontown Hospital receive high marks from physicians and staff. Turnaround times are consistent and have continued to improve since implementation and there is no backlog. An internal benchmark of four hours for stats and six hours for H&Ps has been established and is consistently being achieved. Turnaround time adherence is greater than 99.5% with quality scores of over 99.0%. Dr. XX, Chairman of the Medical Records Committee expressed his satisfaction, “The reports are ready almost before I am done dictating them.”

The Acusis staff and Hospital IT department continue to collaborate as needs arise. Recently, Acusis provided improvements for echocardiogram dictation, a procedure difficult to transcribe due to the mixture of numeric and alpha-numeric entities. Though this was outside the initial scope, Acusis devised a template for physician use that drives all components needed to be captured. The focus on partnering to deliver service to the end user continues beyond the implementation phase. Keniston, expressed her sentiments, “It is a pleasure to work with people that want to get it right. Every interaction with Acusis staff gives a sense of passion for performance.”

Improvements made in medical transcription through the Acusis partnership has resulted in high quality, timely patient care documentation, additional savings for the hospital to invest in patient care, improved workflow processes, and continued meaningful use accuracy of medical reporting. The flexibility of Acusis to engage as a partner to Uniontown Hospital and work within the hospital’s framework created an environment that allowed a seamless, smooth transition to outsourcing the medical transcription service. Handy reflects upon the past year “We are pleased all-around with Acusis service, from implementation to continuous support, and with the relationships that have been developed.”

About the author



Michael J. Romano, Jr.
is a Director – Advisory Services, ADAMS