

Flash Forward: Leadership's Commitment is Crucial at a Hospital where Tomorrow Comes Today

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by Kevin Heubusch, managing editor

When Angela Lehman, RHIA, arrived at Oklahoma Heart Hospital, Oklahoma City, in April 2004, the facility was less than two years old. From day one, it had been nearly paperless. For Lehman, the director of health information, the hospital leadership's full commitment to the EHR's success is the crucial element in this cutting-edge facility.

Paper Beware

Despite the lack of paper, Lehman still has a full staff of nine employees—all the “primary players,” as she puts it. The one traditional role lacking is a clerk to assemble the paper record. Instead, a systems analyst helps support the electronic record, including troubleshooting.

The analyst has an RHIA and has spent much of her career in systems. Other analysts support the EHR in billing, clinical, and pharmacy and lab, Lehman explains. Most have some type of IT background and experience in a specialty area. The clinical systems analyst, for example, is a nurse.

The only papers in the system are consent forms, which require signatures—a total of four to five per patient. But these never make it to a permanent file.

Once a patient signs a form, nurses scan it at the point of care. The paper form goes in the patient's folder and is kept for 90 days—until it is confirmed in the system. Then it is shredded.

That's been the protocol from day one, says Lehman, so scanning the consent forms has always been standard practice for the nurses. It's one example of how the new facility and new system make managing a nontraditional HIM process a little easier for Lehman. Someone transitioning from paper, she notes, may have greater challenges in reengineering old processes.

“If we had more paper documents, things would be different,” she says. “The process might not be so easy.” The hospital plans to remove even the few paper forms it has. A future goal is to capture patient signatures electronically.

Leadership's “Huge Buy-In”

Lehman had been intrigued by Oklahoma Heart Hospital before she ever contemplated joining the staff. Her father had been a patient there, and she had been very impressed by the care. She was impressed not just by the clinical aspect, she says, but by the entire facility staff.

At the time, Lehman worked at a hospital management company, building out HIM departments and systems. She enjoyed the work, but when one of the company's senior managers became the CFO of Oklahoma Heart Hospital, Lehman followed.

The hospital's success with its EHR is a result of the leadership's commitment, according to Lehman. The physicians who helped start the facility have a “huge buy-in” to the system, she says. “Their vision was to be totally paperless. They want the system to be fully used.”

Lehman's HIM department has the same goal. “If [the physicians] are not successful, we are not successful,” she says. Thus she feels that HIM should have a key role in helping physicians transition to the system. The department has a dedicated physician liaison who even provides instruction right in physician offices.

“Without strong leadership, a totally electronic world won’t happen. It can’t be successful without that leadership,” Lehman says. She notes that leadership’s positive attitude makes it easier for directors to roll out changes. But being paperless provides its own frustrations, Lehman is quick to admit. “There are some days—very few—that you want to pull your hair out,” she says. “When those come, we work as a team and work it out.”

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