Radiology Moves to the CPR

Save to myBoK

by Gwen Hughes, RHIA

As HIM professionals move toward paperless health records, our colleagues in radiology are making the transition to filmless records.

Those in predominantly paper-based ambulatory care environments know how challenging it is to make sure each patient record contains all the required dictation and test results for that next appointment. Our colleagues in radiology and imaging departments face similar challenges. Their experience is complicated, however, by the fact that making copies of films is so expensive that there's usually just one set, and many departments loan their films to providers located on and off the facility's campus.

The inefficiencies associated with tracking and locating films, coupled with the high cost of producing and storing them, have led some radiology and imaging departments to implement picture archiving communications systems (PACS). In general, PACS allow images that would once have appeared on film to be recorded and stored in computers. Instead of interpreting a film, radiologists read images on computer workstations. Ordering physicians then view images on workstations located throughout the healthcare organization.

Benefits of PACS

PACS offers several benefits to healthcare organizations. These include:

- Elimination of film complications. Because PACS eliminate the need to develop film, problems associated with chemicals and incorrect exposure can be avoided. Further, neither the patient nor radiologist have to wait for film processing. The radiologist sees the same image as the technician. Additionally, because films are no longer loaned and transported, they're no longer lost. Patients don't have to wait while films are located, and they don't have to undergo repeat testing if films can't be found. "Soft-copy" images are immediately available online to physicians on PACS workstations located throughout the enterprise
- Increased efficiency. Because exam time is reduced, productivity increases. In a recent Health Management Technology article, K. Michael Calvin, administrator of imaging services at Medical Center Clinic in Pensacola, FL, noted that he expects to increase exam load by 60 to 70 percent.[1] Moreover, facilities that can eliminate film entirely need not use human resources to file, retrieve, track, and locate it
- Reduced expenses. In addition to improvements in quality and efficiency, implementation of PACS can reduce supply expenses. Stephen Curry, director of radiology at Princeton Community Hospital, a 211-bed acute care general hospital in West Virginia, reported in a Health Management Technology article saving $25,000 a month on film expenses.[2] PACS can also reduce building costs in new facilities: when film is no longer the media of choice, expensive storage that requires reinforced flooring can be eliminated
- Future integration potential. When PACS and radiology information systems (RIS) are integrated, radiologists can interpret an online image while reviewing a previously transcribed report or authenticate a recently transcribed report while viewing the corresponding online image[3]
- Electronic transferability. Appropriately networked PACS allow an electronic image captured at a remote site to be sent to a radiologist located elsewhere. The radiologist can then interpret the image and send back a detailed report

Radiology Technology in the Future

Although the benefits of PACS, especially when appropriately integrated with RIS, are impressive, the future of radiology technology presents fascinating possibilities as well. For example, as bandwidth increases, images may not need to be fixed. Instead, they can be streaming video images. Such systems might include synchronized dictation and pointer movements over images, as features are highlighted with arrows and other annotations.

HIM's Additional Responsibility

Whatever the configuration, PACS and any associated networking affect records and health record managers. The increasing integration of text with images calls into question current retention practices. Many states allow the routine destruction of radiological images after a certain period of time, relying on the text copy as the legal record. It's important that HIM professionals begin evaluating the differences between the paper and electronic health record and give consideration to adjusting retention practices.

Notes

1. Calvin, K. Michael. "Building a Filmless Department." Health Management Technology 22, no. 2 (2001): 64-65.
2. Curry, Stephen. "X-ray Vision." Health Management Technology 21, no. 11 (2000): 18.
3. Stamer, Lisa. "Images of the Future." Healthcare Informatics 17, no. 11 (2000): 69-74

Reference

Yakel, Elizabeth. "An Institutional View of Electronic Records Management: Hospitals and Teleradiology." The Information Management Journal 35, no.1 (2001): 26-33.

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