The Need for Efficient Delivery of Healthcare

How automated are your processes?

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Business and clinical processes that are ineffectively planned are a principal driver of excessive medical office inefficiency with its concurrent high expenses. Everything from patient scheduling to reimbursement is accomplished through the employment of a process that links various tasks together to achieve a specific outcome. Comparing any two practices with similar patient volumes reveals that if one employs efficient processes, it achieves outcomes faster, better, and with fewer staff than one that is bogged down by inefficiency. For patients, the optimal results of an efficiently run practice are increased access to care and shorter waits. For a practice, efficiency results in better outcomes, elimination of paperwork backlogs, higher collection ratios, and lower error rates—all of which lead to more satisfied patients, lower costs, and increased profit.

Because of the ever-increasing complexity of the healthcare system, doctors are constantly adding more tasks to their existing processes. This complexity is currently being generated in large part by the need to stay compliant and deal with time-consuming third-party billing rules, making it ever more challenging to maintain efficiency. The difficulty of and time required for integrating the growing number of external rules and regulations into existing business processes are major factors in causing those processes to bog down.

Because it is difficult for doctors with little business training to understand and recognize the intricacies within a process as well as the interconnections among them, it is also difficult for them to re-engineer those processes in a way that makes workflow more efficient. It is, however, imperative that this be done. The efficient re-engineering of business processes has been the primary driver, enabling most industries in today's economy to both increase

quality and lower costs. Doctors must learn to do the same.

To better recognize and understand inefficiency in processes, it is helpful to analyze well-designed, simple processes from different industries—ones that efficiently deliver services we are all familiar with—and then compare them with extreme examples of those same services being driven by extremely inefficient processes. I have found such an example in the fast-food industry—the delivery process for KFC orders in Palestine's Gaza City. Let me contrast this process to that "same"

delivery service in the United States. In the U.S., ordering KFC for delivery is a relatively straightforward, fast, efficient process consisting of the following steps: 1) make a phone call or go online, 2) give an order, and 3) wait twenty to thirty minutes for hot food to be delivered at the front door.

Compare this simple process with a KFC order from Gaza City, which is located near the Egyptian border. This is a place where,

even under the best of conditions, the delivery process can take more than four hours, and the food delivered typically arrives cold. Initiating this service requires that the customer first place an international call to Egypt. S/he then submits the order and makes payment by wire transfer. The food is cooked at a franchise in El Arish on Egypt's Northern Sinai Peninsula and is then picked up by a taxi driver. Meanwhile, in Palestine, a second cabdriver arrives at a Hamas checkpoint in the city of Rafah on his

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153

side of the border with Egypt.

At this point, he calls his Egyptian counterpart and tells him which one of the numerous underground tunnels the Hamas official has cleared for food delivery on that day. The Egyptian cab driver proceeds to

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the assigned tunnel and transfers the order to several teenagers who walk it through about a half-mile of tunnel before loading it into the Palestinian driver's taxi, which is bound for Gaza City. Upon arrival, the order is delivered to the office of an entrepreneur who is in charge of the overall process. This man sorts the meals for delivery, and they go out from there on a fleet of motorbikes. The bikers deliver the chicken (usually cold) to the customers' doorsteps.

While this process may seem ludicrous to us, it is the only one available to those eager KFC customers in Gaza City who want delivery. Clearly, changing the location where the work is done by opening a KFC in Gaza City would completely re-engineer the process, creating a much more efficient workflow.

When we list all of the rules, regulations, hoops, and barriers that doctors must jump through just to get paid for their services, the process often seems similarly laughable. A major difference in the two examples is that doctors have complete control over the portion of the processes that are completed within their own practices. They can create efficient workflow by determining where the work is to be done and how the tasks that comprise the processes are designed and integrated.

More importantly, unlike the KFC example, geographic boundaries become irrelevant. Thanks to today's technology, processes can be employed at any point within a single office and even spread over multiple practice locations with work being done anywhere in the workflow that makes the most sense. Many tasks can be eliminated, or combined and automated. Importantly, information needed for physician and staff communication or

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decision-making is available at the moment it is needed, wherever it is needed.

Most processes that doctors currently use were never thoughtfully designed. Many are based on workflow that was in place long before computers even existed, with much of that old workflow simply being automated with little thought of how computers could be employed to re-design and make processes more efficient.

If you were to analyze the processes in your practice, starting with simply listing every step needed to complete each process and noting where each part of the work is performed and decisions made, you might see that some of your processes actually resemble that of KFC delivery in Gaza City. Once a process is laid out in a visible fashion, bottlenecks and unnecessary steps will reveal themselves. This will make it possible to find a better way to eliminate them and re-arrange the remaining crucial steps, creating a more logical and efficient flow. Since all processes are ultimately "connected," the end result for your practice will be overall increased quality and reduced costs. **PM**

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154