

## First Read: Tracking Teleradiology

Field must respond to market pressures

By: Scott Huelskamp

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For the last several months, teleradiology circles have been buzzing with the impending merger of Virtual Radiologic (vRad) and NightHawk Radiology. How would it alter the teleradiology landscape? What changes could be expected?

Well, truth be told, teleradiology has been shaping and shifting for some time. And this merger was merely another component of the evolution. These days, teleradiology is a vital part of doing business, something that's no longer viewed as luxury. Imaging specialists and subspecialists are available every day, all day and night to clinics and hospitals, regardless of location or distance. Data transmission and storage are no longer problems. State-of-the-art technology has become the norm.

So, as 2011 gets underway, we devoted a portion of our first issue of the year to this ever-burgeoning field. All aspects of healthcare are under tremendous pressure, and teleradiology is no exception. But that pressure can be an impetus for change.

I spoke with vRad president and chief executive officer Rob Kill a few weeks ago to get his perspective. Kill stressed three main themes of expanding access, improving quality, and reducing costs. By focusing on those areas, teleradiology can enhance the quality of patient care and improve the efficiency of delivering it, he says.

"The future is bright for teleradiology," says Kill. "The definition of teleradiology is evolving, but it becomes a tool to expand services and enable facilities to reduce costs."

When the vRad and NightHawk merger was finalized in December, they put the finishing touches on an organization that will provide practices and hospitals with access to 325 affiliated radiologists – approximately 75 percent are fellowship-trained subspecialists. They will serve nearly 2,700 healthcare facilities in all 50 states, and will read somewhere in the neighborhood of 7 million studies annually.

"Local practices are under pressure to be more efficient and productive and we're in a position to help them do that," Kill says. "Our partnerships with clients will evolve as the market changes. Their success becomes our success."

Granted, vRad is the dominant player in the market. Yet, the same methods of improvement apply to all. Teleradiology providers have to consider building a deeper roster of specialists and subspecialists. And the demand grows for even faster, timely interpretation that never compromises accuracy. Most providers are boasting turnaround times under 30 minutes, with some as fast as 5 to 10 minutes. Reads for stat cases, such as patients who may have suffered a stroke, are immediate.



Scott Huelskamp is managing editor of rt image.

Joe Moock, a managing partner of StatRad in San Diego, highlights criteria for teleradiology providers to prove their solutions translate into value-added services ([click here to go to Moock's full article](#)). Today, qualities such as credentialing and certification, support and education, seamless communication, quality assurance, and user-friendly client portals are more important than ever.

"When it comes to teleradiology, facilities are seeking the most established, reliable and supportive practices that boast a proven track record when it comes to accurate readings," says Moock.

And technology allows small providers to compete with the larger organizations. "Ideally, teleradiology should make both the hospital and radiology group more confident and comfortable in the level of service and quality of care provided to patients," says Moock.