

## Examine | Teleradiology: Get Your Money's Worth

*What to look for when choosing a teleradiology partner*

By Joe Moock

*In this installment of Examine | Teleradiology, Joe Moock, CEO of San Diego-based StatRad, shares his insight on the benefits of using teleradiology services and what specific experience and technology should be expected of a provider.*

As hospital budgets become strained and medical groups begin to experience decreasing revenues due to the growing number of uninsured using the emergency department (ED) as their primary care provider, it is important to cast a critical eye over every department. Cost-saving measures typically include staffing cuts and efforts to eliminate waste. To do this effectively, each department must perform self-audits to ensure maximum efficiency in all aspects of operation.

As an unintended consequence, personnel such as after-hours radiology staff can be negatively impacted by many imposed job cuts. At busier facilities, technologists are likely to become easily overwhelmed by growing demands placed on them as the combined result of increasing medical utilization and cutbacks in support services.

Radiology technologists are constantly multitasking – such is the nature of the beast. Their time must be carefully split between several duties, including scanning and transporting patients, sending images, filling out requisition forms, pushing prior images from PACS, and printing reports and faxing them to the teleradiology provider. This all occurs as additional patients wait to be scanned. When a report is completed and sent back, technologists are then responsible for scanning or entering the results back into the hospital HIS/RIS/PACS so medical staff can review reports.

Needless to say, this is a time-consuming and labor-intensive process. At night, the situation may worsen as staffing typically becomes lean after 9 p.m. Not only does this create a stressful work environment, but it can also unnecessarily increase the length of stay for patients and impact the workflow of numerous departments. To aid in these after-hours instances, hospitals and radiology groups often pay for a third-party teleradiology provider. However, many of these groups do not receive the added benefit of clerical support services.

Teleradiology providers should act as the hub of the radiology operation and play an active, dominant role – not only in terms of interpretive services, but also with regard to clerical support. Some teleradiology companies recognize the importance of such a program and possess the ability to provide services on both sides of the coin – helping staff and increasing the productivity of hospitals and radiology groups. Systems have been developed to ensure many administrative tasks can be handled internally rather than placing the burden on hospital staff.

For example, to assist with the accuracy of a read, an automated DICOM query/retrieve can be performed to pull over any relevant prior studies from the hospital PACS for a patient. Additionally, through HL-7 interfaces or even through a manual process of logging into hospital systems, teleradiology companies can pull prior reports to ensure their radiologists have all the necessary information to provide the best possible care for patients.

This type of interface allows for a hospital or radiology group to truly get the most out of partnering with a teleradiology provider and contributes the added benefit of instant, seamless communication.

Additionally, transmission of findings should be streamlined so the technologists are not burdened with relaying results or scanning them into hospital systems. Your teleradiology partner should offer multiple reporting options such as faxing of reports, online availability, an HL-7 interface to automate distribution, manual posting of reports to hospital systems by teleradiology staff, etc.

Asking the ED staff to change their workflow or to log onto yet another system after hours is no longer acceptable. They should have instant access to findings through their normal application.

Regardless of the provider chosen, the ability to interface with existing systems and processes will ensure you are getting your money's worth and reaping all the benefits that come with the implementation of a teleradiology program. A teleradiology partner should not dictate workflow; it should help streamline it. The partner should also be flexible enough to meet your institution's needs and become an active part of the healthcare team supporting the ED, surgical, and trauma teams.

More importantly, the teleradiology provider should be equipped with technology that will lessen the burden of understaffed radiology departments at night. While they can't transport or scan patients, their abilities should extend far beyond simply faxing back a report.

To enhance workflow at any institution, a fully automated system that deliver reports quickly and directly to hospital systems is a necessity. Whether an electronic copy of a report needs to be transmitted or exam findings require manual posting in PACS, advanced technology is the key to delivering quality information promptly. The ability to integrate systems relieves stress, eases the technologist's duties, and ultimately improves the standard of care at any hospital or facility.

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