

Boosting Quality Care in Teleradiology

Adhering to criteria translates to value-added service

As the healthcare industry continues to cope with strained budgets and address public opinion, hospitals and healthcare providers are critically analyzing the operations of individual departments more than ever, and implementing only the most cost-effective means to achieve quality patient care.

For teleradiology providers, there is additional pressure to demonstrate unmatched value in all activities at all times. 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.

With more than 100 teleradiology companies to choose from, differing in size, capability and coverage offered, providers must be certain they are meeting the following criteria to prove their teleradiology solutions translate into value-added services.

Certification and credentials. Credentialing is resurfacing as an issue in the teleradiology industry, as the Center for Medicare and Medicaid Services now suggests that reading physicians be approved and appointed privileges at each facility they serve. This process can be streamlined if the teleradiology company acts as a CVO for the hospital and provides their primary source verifications.

In order to do so, the teleradiology company must be able to prove that they abide by the 10 Joint Commission guidelines. As facilities examine their current providers or consider others, they are bound to scrutinize the caliber of teleradiologists to ensure their level of patient care is enhanced, rather than hindered.

A teleradiology service should supply this information so the hospital does not have to collect it. In addition, providers offering board-certified radiologists with expertise in sub-specialties, such as cardiac imaging, musculoskeletal imaging, pediatric radiology, and MRI, as well as other 3-D post-processing applications, are guaranteed to exhibit a competitive edge.



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Support and education. It may seem obvious, but the level of support teleradiology providers supply never goes unnoticed. Technicians must be accessible and able to provide assistance and address issues 24 hours a day, 365 days a year.

On implementation, providers must allocate time and contribute their knowledge to properly train hospital staff and technologists. As a result, facilities can expect uninterrupted workflow. The educating process does not end here.

Because technology is always evolving, it is crucial for providers to keep facilities' staff up-to-date on any changes they see in day-to-day operations. Once the service is in place, issues must be resolved immediately through effective communications to ensure the highest level of patient care remains intact. When providers work alongside their clients, their immeasurable value is recognized and appreciated.

Be small, look big. Larger teleradiology providers are facing strict competition as many healthcare groups opt to employ smaller service providers. New cost-effective technologies make it easier for smaller providers to operate as if they're much larger.

Providers displaying the ability to offer the same round-the-clock expertise, yet deliver quicker responses and improved customer service that often coincide with a smaller organization, will prove they are capable of servicing any facility.

Quality assurance. Regardless of whether a clinician is planning on using teleradiology for routine outpatient care or in an emergency care setting, it is essential to select a provider who understands that attention to detail and quality are always critical components of service.

Look for providers with built-in quality assurance (QA) programs that offer advanced performance auditing capabilities. A QA program that meets this need ensures the highest standard of care is maintained and eliminates potentially dangerous errors from being repeated. In addition, a sound program should allow for auditing and statistical reporting to occur in "real-time." This feature enables hospitals or radiology group members to monitor teleradiology services rendered in multiple areas, including quality/error rates, turnaround times, critical values, hospital stroke codes, the number of studies by a specific radiologist, percent of studies delayed, and number of studies that exceed specific time limits.

Reporting that allows for in-depth performance tracking, which provides a level of transparency and open communication that benefits all parties.

Seamless communication. When assessing different teleradiology offerings, evaluate providers with the ability to facilitate immediate, physician-to-physician communication for all critical results, stroke codes, and trauma cases. Your teleradiology provider should have a concrete plan in place to facilitate physician-to-physician communication and document the communications that occurred to reduce risk within your organization.

They should possess the capability to connect radiologists who identify critical values immediately to either attending physicians or charge nurses in the emergency department. The ideal situation is for the provider to seamlessly call in these results, then update the report and medical record for subsequent interpretation.

Require that the teleradiologists call in the results rather than a radiologist assistant, which facilitates discussion of the case and reduces misinterpretations. This scenario allows the patient to receive the best care in the timeliest manner. The sophistication of workflow and technology facilitates easy avenues for physician-to-physician communication.

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User-friendly client portal. While it is common practice for providers to offer client portals for their customers to submit requisitions, not all are designed with the imaging technologist in mind.

It is important to identify a provider that offers a portal with the ability for technologists to select from a list of recent studies when requesting reads. The benefits of this measure are that the teleradiology group can auto-populate information from the DICOM header as a result of clicking on which study they intend to send. This step saves time and eliminates the potential for human error when entering patient information.

State-of-the-art technology. It is crucial to have the best technology when implementing a teleradiology program. Most clinicians are aware they need high-speed, up-to-date servers. However, a popular method still implemented by many providers is a setup that routes studies from the imaging modality through DICOM communications across the Internet over a virtual private network (VPN) to a remote server.

A set-up of this nature is prone to the inherently chatty nature of DICOM communications and does not offer 100-percent confidence that studies will be received or that they will be sent in a timely manner. A provider that supplies on-site servers will allow quick image transfers.

This arrangement will have a significant effect on turnaround times and security of patient information, and it conforms to HIPAA standards. The on-site server will allow images to be compressed locally and sent using an efficient method of transmission, so they are sent to reading radiologists at high speed rates (20 images per second). A VPN will secure and lock down data, bulletproofing information against the outside world.

Some services can even encrypt and push the images from hospital servers across the Internet without the need for VPNs, which makes transmission even easier.

Accessibility of prior reports. This is a novel concept for most teleradiology providers. But the truly innovative industry thought leaders are pursuing this avenue and building technology to make access to prior images and reports seamless when performing preliminary reads.

Be certain the teleradiology provider has the capability to interface with an existing RIS/PACS system, so that prior images and reports can be automatically pulled without asking technologists to do extra work. The capability to call on prior reports for reference when performing teleradiology reads provides more detailed findings and enhanced patient care.

It is understood that the ultimate goal of the healthcare industry is to deliver the best possible care to patients. Today, radiologists are working harder than ever to meet growing imaging demands. But increases in patient flow, coupled with limited budgets, have presented a trying task to hospitals and healthcare providers.

Teleradiology providers who can deliver unsurpassed service and technology will continue to be acknowledged as a value-added entity and provide peace of mind that patients are receiving the best quality of care from them and also from their chosen teleradiology provider.

Ideally, teleradiology should make both the hospital and radiology group more confident and comfortable in the level or service and quality of care provided to patients. It is of the utmost importance to find a teleradiology solution that fits individual needs, is attentive to issues and concerns, and forms a genuine partnership to improve on existing service offerings.

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