

Teleradiology Simplifies and Enhances the Delivery of Quality Care

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The healthcare industry is facing a critical time; physicians and staff, already inundated with patient needs, are being asked to perform more tasks in a broader spectrum of medical categories. While it's important to be knowledgeable in a variety of medical specialties, with emerging and evolving technology, it is impossible to be a jack-of-all-trades. Outpatient care facilities must find alternative measures to ensure the highest level of patient quality care is maintained in both patient diagnosis and treatment.

An area that requires much of the time and attention of an ambulatory surgery center is imaging needs. In today's healthcare environment, the demand for imaging procedures is increasing at a far greater rate than the number of radiologists, which can make work flow a difficult and time-consuming task.

Most outpatient facilities don't have a full-time, on-site radiologist, so they must turn to a local radiology group for their imaging needs. These radiology groups must travel from facility to facility conducting reads, and they often need help keeping up with patient demands. To tackle this dilemma and ensure quality of care, many facilities and their radiology groups are turning to teleradiology.

Teleradiology allows imaging centers and ambulatory surgery centers to electronically transmit patient images, via a secure protocol, to an off-site radiologist who is waiting to conduct the read. The radiologist then analyzes the study and sends the report back to the patient's physician. The ability to remotely send, read and diagnose digital images quickly and accurately is a phenomenon that has allowed healthcare practitioners to meet patient needs in ways never before thought possible.

While local radiology groups are usually able to provide high-quality interpretations, it can be problematic for those groups to provide on-site reading services for several small volume locations at a time. Implementing a teleradiology solution within the group can prove to be very cost prohibitive, not only with an initial investment in a picture archiving and communication system (PACS) but also with the high cost of ongoing technical support.

Access to subspecialized radiologists can be difficult, especially for those groups in remote or rural locations, and teleradiology provides a helping hand. Radiology groups themselves are turning to teleradiology providers for help to create their own internal teleradiology solution, but also for subspecialty interpretation assistance. Patients at outpatient facilities often have a wide variety of cases to diagnose. This makes it necessary for the radiologist providing the read to have an expansive knowledge of subspecialties. Additionally, the latest advances in imaging technology are making reading within specialties more complex, something these off-site radiologists are more than equipped to handle.

Reading for numerous remote locations offers radiologists the opportunity to receive a workload that keeps them busy and focused on their specific training, but when volumes increase, they sometimes need help conducting all of their reads. It can be impossible to predict when patient demand will increase or decrease. Teleradiology can often be an economical and time-saving solution for this change in demand, for both the outpatient facility and the imaging group.

Teleradiology providers typically have a large pool of subspecialty experts on staff, and this grants these facilities and radiology groups the luxury of having fellowship-trained experts available as they are needed. It also provides them with the flexibility to meet patient demand in an efficient and cost-effective way, with the confidence that their patients are receiving the best quality of care.

Beyond the advantages that teleradiology experts provide, the IT benefit has significantly impacted patient flow. The increased bandwidth with which images are sent has allowed for faster transmission of images. Streamlined systems and workflow have allowed teleradiologists to provide premium patient care from remote locations, whether interpretations come from the local radiology group or from an outsourced teleradiology provider.

With demand for imaging reads growing steadily by the day, and outpatient staffs and imaging groups being stretched thinner than ever, it's important to reevaluate the ways in which facilities can run more efficiently to enhance patient care. Outsourcing teleradiology is a win-win situation for everyone involved: allowing the staff to focus on their specialized tasks, the imaging group to respond effectively to a more reasonable workload, and the patient to receive the best and fastest care possible.

Joe Moock is the chief operating officer at StatRad, a premier provider of teleradiology solutions. Headquartered in San Diego, StatRad's U.S.-trained, board-certified radiologists and staff deliver interpretations and reliable programs that increase efficiency and improve patient care. Their services allow hospitals and healthcare groups to save money, supplement staffing, satisfy hospital clients, and maintain control.