StatRad’s CEO Responds to the ACR White Paper on Teleradiology Practice

The recently published ACR white paper on teleradiology practice is a well written article that brings up many very good points for evaluating your teleradiology service. Over the past couple of years, many groups have focused on pricing as the main factor when considering different practices. However, there is much more than money at stake when choosing a teleradiology partner. In many cases, your teleradiology service is covering your radiology department for one half or one third of the day. Making sure the same level of care is provided while you are not on site is essential to keeping the Emergency Department and the rest of the medical staff happy. Also, protecting your practice is becoming more important and should be at the forefront of everyone’s minds in any professional relationship.

Teleradiology Industry Today

As mentioned in the article, many teleradiology companies have had to “rebrand or retrench” as a result of uncertain market forces. Many also have to show continued growth and profitability to their shareholders, equity groups or parent companies. Our opinion is that the requirement for continued growth and profitability is the market force that has caused teleradiology services to change models and switch to finals or take over full hospital contracts. Many of the large teleradiology companies out there today publicly advertise their ability to provide cost savings by displacing a radiology practice.

About StatRad

Many customers have asked me “what is your exit strategy?” It is an interesting question and I always respond by asking “what is yours?” I view StatRad as a radiology group without hospital or imaging center contracts. We specialize in after-hours emergency department reads. StatRad is radiologist-owned and we operate just as any other radiology group. Buy-ins don’t make sense as there are no technical component reimbursements to benefit from and because the radiologists are paid predetermined percentage of the revenue, the rest simply goes to operations, research, development and other areas to promote the stability of our practice.

The Importance of On-Site Radiologists

The benefits of teleradiology are commonly known. Some of the disadvantages are commonly known among the radiology community but not necessarily by hospital or health care administration. It is important for groups to take an active role at the facility because that is something that can never be replaced. Do not resort to simple report distribution and contribute to the commoditization of our industry as some teleradiology companies have. In fact, it is important to integrate your teleradiology partner as discussed in a recent blog post on our website: Benefits of Integrating Your Teleradiology Provider. Developing a close relationship with your teleradiology provider will help you improve your

Joe Moock, CEO, StatRad
own practice. It also lets the medical staff know that you aren’t simply outsourcing call; you are making sure that everything runs as smooth at night as it does during the day.

**Task Force Recommendations**

Some of the task force recommendations seem to be common sense. However, there may be companies out there that don’t follow them. In my opinion, licensure, medical staff membership, appropriate privileges, malpractice coverage, continued CME and board certification of all teleradiologists have been requirements from day one.

Comments regarding participation in quality improvement initiatives were stated but could be expanded upon even further. Teleradiology companies have the unique advantage of gathering data from many different facilities across the nation. StatRad has online reporting capabilities that not only allow our clients to monitor our performance, but the performance of their own department as well. Turnaround times can be compared to the average of all other StatRad clients. Information on ordering physician and technologist timing can be collected and analyzed. Our team has worked with clients to determine faults in a process, whether they stem from either end, and used the data to change the system to prevent the issue from reoccurring. Again, the close relationship and tight integration with your teleradiology services should offer you additional toolsets to help your practice beyond just the delivery of the report.

**How to Know if Your Teleradiology Provider is Ghost Reading**

Unfortunately ghost reading is part of the industry and it is imperative your practice fully vet any potential partner to make sure your studies aren’t being sent offshore. The white paper refers to ghost reading on the part of the group (not the teleradiology company) but be aware of what is happening with your patients’ images when being sent offsite. Some common questions to ask are:

1. Where are the images being transferred?
2. Do our images ever leave the US?
3. How many studies per hour do your radiologists typically read?
   a. Compare this with what is received at night.
4. How many radiologists will you need to credential?
   a. Does this seem logical compared to your volume?
   b. Keep in mind, teleradiologists typically work every other 7 day week.

I am contacted quite frequently by radiology groups or companies from other countries willing to interpret studies for pennies on the dollar so our radiologists can quickly review the reports and images and thereby improve productivity. We obviously don’t take part in this practice but the fact that we continue to hear from foreign firms leads me to believe that they are gaining a customer base. Why continue selling a service if there is no market for it?

**Obtaining Prior Reports**

Since I started with StatRad almost 13 years ago, we have always requested prior reports and images. In the past, the technologists would have to push the images over and fax the prior reports. Our radiologists don’t work in a vacuum - they need access to the same pertinent information that is available to the onsite radiologist to be able to create a complete and accurate report. Fortunately, with Joe Moock, CEO, StatRad
advances in technology and customizations to our system, we are able to pull prior studies from remote PACS with the push of a single button. If an HL7 interface is available, we can gain access to prior reports and complete medical records without intervention by anyone at the hospital. We will even go so far as to log in to client PACS to obtain prior reports if possible. This reduces the workload and burden on the night time staff and decreases the total turnaround time as we have instant access to the information.

Maintaining Excellent Communication with your Teleradiology Provider

Communication is key in any patient care setting. During the day it is common for ED physicians to discuss a case with the radiologist. The same should be true after hours. At StatRad, clients can dial a single number and be connected with a radiology assistant who can transfer them directly to a radiologist. Additionally, we have made it easy for our radiologists to call in all critical findings and critical test results. Our system automatically prompts our radiology assistants to get the appropriate caregiver on the phone for physician-to-physician communication. Not only does this offer the opportunity to discuss the case in more detail, but the communication is logged and is available in a downloadable report to our clients – an invaluable tool for Joint Commission visits. Additionally, StatRad radiologists are available to answer questions or provide clarification for any physician at the hospital.

Teleradiology Contracts

The contracting component of the white paper brings up some excellent points but I think a key component was missing. Teleradiology was born to support and supplement onsite coverage, never to replace it. A non-compete clause should be standard in every contract. StatRad has created a “Declaration of Commitment” to the radiology industry and as part of that commitment, we include a non-compete clause in every contract. StatRad will not solicit business from client’s hospitals even after the expiration of the contract. Every teleradiology company that is out to support groups and radiology practices should be willing to do the same.

Selecting the Right Teleradiology Service Provider

Do your homework when choosing a teleradiology service. Price is always a consideration but far more is at stake when you select a teleradiology partner. Consider finding the answers to some of these unconventional questions to learn more about a potential partner:

- Who are their owners?
- What is their long term strategy?
- Do they have a history of predatory practices?
- What technological capabilities can they offer to support your group?
- How exactly do they monitor quality and turn-around times?

Taking the time to truly understand a potential teleradiology partner can help prevent complaints, heartache, malpractice costs and a negative relationship with your medical staff later on.

Joe Moock, CEO, StatRad