

“We Buy A Lot Less Paper Nowadays”

Automation has precipitated multi-faceted change resulting in a 23% efficiency increase for **Deaconess HomeCare’s Adult Nursing Division**, (DHC) headquartered in Hattiesburg, Mississippi. Ask VP of Operations Karen Utterback what technology has done for her agency and she scarcely knows where to begin.

Under Utterback’s leadership, technology has touched every employee: back office staff, field clinicians and therapists, home health aides and, recently, even referring physicians. In an agency serving an average daily census of 2,400 patients through seven provider numbers, that means touching people in 25 offices across 4 states.

DHC kept a homegrown, billing-only application alive for years until it became apparent it could not be made Y2k-compliant and would require extensive work to assist in the much needed area of clinical documentation. Nurses carried a mountain of paper every day and were required to drive to the office at least twice per week and encouraged to come in daily. Home Health Aides and therapists bore the same burden, including daily time sheets that also had to be transported to the office in time for each payroll deadline. Office staff spent hours each week reconciling visit notes to time logs. Staff in each of the agency’s 25 offices set aside time to hand-deliver copies of verbal orders to physicians, and worked diligently at month end to coax last-minute signatures from them prior to billing. Non-clinical employees numbers were kept high to accomplish all these extraneous tasks.

In 1995, SMHH brought in an outside consultant to assist in choosing a software vendor to help dig itself out from under a mountain of paper. After an extensive search, in May 1996, the agency contracted with **McKesson, Inc.** (then MSI) of Springfield, Missouri, to provide its DOS product. In late 1998 plans were made to migrate from DOS to Windows and *Pathways Homecare*. Their go-live date on *Pathways Homecare* (now known as *Horizon Homecare*) was May 1, 1999.

TELEPHONY

One of the best investments SMHH made, according to COO Utterback, was a telephone-based data entry system for Home Health Aides. Using patient telephones, the system has completely eliminated paper for that level of caregiver, including both visit notes and payroll time sheets. “We have reduced the amount of clerical support we need for Aides,” Utterback reports. “There are no more attendance logs or visit notes and no need

to track employees down to remind them to turn in time sheets. Consequently, we’ve also greatly reduced travel time and unnecessary office trips.”

Calls from HHAs in the field are compared with the employee’s schedule and logged as they arrive. Precise time-in/time-out data is captured via calls to a local or 800 number. Utterback cites reports that show visit start calls taking less than a minute to complete and visit completion calls – including time to record all visit activities – less than three minutes. Considering the time savings and accuracy boost, Utterback calculated her agency’s return on investment for this system at 9 months.

An unexpected side effect of McKesson’s telephony system has been enhanced recruiting. Staff retention and recruiting of aides is up at all DHC locations since telephony was installed. Employees have taken to the system with enthusiasm and apparently tell friends at other agencies about it. “Home Health Aides love it because they no longer have to write down their visit notes and drive them into the office,” Utterback explains. “Our schedulers love it too because they can always see where each HHA is all day long and no longer have to place multiple phone calls to track them down.” The system alerts the aide to their personal schedule and can be checked seven days in advance via the system.

POINT-OF-CARE

McKesson’s laptop-based clinical system for field nurses and therapists has changed the way SMHH operates as well. Nurses have reduced the number of trips they need to make to the office. They enjoy having access to up-to-date patient information. Though there has been no productivity gain among visiting nurses and therapists because of mobile automation, there has been a clerical efficiency gain because of the point-of-care system. Utterback keeps track. She divides total visits by clerical hours before and after point-of-care and telephony implementation and has noted a 23% efficiency increase. There is always a temporary decrease in clinical productivity while nurses learn an automated system, but Utterback says her staff’s productivity returned to normal in only 6 months.

PHYSICIAN PORTAL

In late December 2001, DHC piloted McKesson’s newest product, *Horizon Physician Portal*. A physician portal is a web site where physicians can look up the status of patients they have referred to home care. Other services include 485 and verbal order review, electronic signatures and oversight time tracking. “We have 30 physicians live on the system so far,” Utterback says, “and they like it so much they actually are recruiting others for us.”

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