

Improvement Area: Hospital Interface Files – Patient Demographic and Insurance Data

Quick tips to enhance an already-efficient billing operation... make the leap from performing well to “best practice”

BY COLIN G. BALL, CCAT/CPAT

Most radiology practices billing for hospital-based services have an established interface file for the transfer of patient demographic and insurance data. These interfaces typically consist of an outgoing file format from the hospital’s billing system(s) cross-walked to an incoming format compatible with the practice’s billing system. During the build phase of the interface, some issues that are overcome include the cross-walk matching of fields, data elements, field lengths, and compatible formatting (i.e., leading/trailing characters).

Unfortunately, in many cases, once the initial cross-walk is built and the interface process has been tested and implemented, most practices do not revisit the programming again until an issue occurs on either end. Given the ever-changing nature of system technology, healthcare regulations and protocols, processes utilized, and staffing issues from training to turnover,

the potential for changes in the data stream necessitates a more proactive approach. Some areas potentially vulnerable to data stream volatility on either the hospital or practice side:

- System modules or version upgrades affecting data storage
 - Screen and/or field additions, deletions, or modifications
 - Function enhancements (i.e., a new managed care module which captures all insurance plan data such as co-pays or deductibles)
- Simple field formatting changes such as extending field length or the relocation of a field
- Modifications to any of the pre-registration, registration, scheduling, insurance verification, or patient data-capture processes
 - Addition, deletion, or modification of tasks performed
 - Entry process changes within the system
 - Paper or non-system process changes



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- Additions, deletions, or modifications to data table elements such as departments, insurance companies, or referring providers (i.e., new capture of referring e-mail addresses for reports)

- Changes in supervisory staff or staff turnover/reorganizations

The most important step is to increase communication with the business office area of the hospital. Capitalize on the good working nature of your physicians' relationship with the hospital and commence regular meetings with the CFO or business manager to stay up on possible changes affecting the data stream. Try to get at least a quarterly meeting to discuss any process or system changes implemented or on the horizon. Even the initiation of meetings to address data-quality issues (such as denial issues you are experiencing as a result of bad data quality or hospital errors) can help keep you on their radar and facilitate ongoing communication. Some other tips include:

- Periodically pull the hospital's insurance matrix data tables – financial classes and insurance companies and review the cross-walk of this data
- Always review the “unassigned” or “other” categories which probably map to your self-pay or commercial financial classes
- Verify Medicare and Medicaid HMOs are not crossing to your HMO or commercial financial classes

- Try to get to know the line managers and supervisors within the admitting functions and a good contact in the billing area of the hospital

- Ensure your staff has at least “view-only” access to all admitting and registration systems and even the billing system if possible

- Check in periodically with all contacts to discuss any potential processing changes or modifications. Bring cookies or snacks for the admitting functions staff when visiting

- Try to get in on steering committees so you can provide input ahead of process or data changes

- Inform all marketing reps, physicians, techs, and other staff frequenting the hospital to inform you should they hear any discussions or rumors regarding potential changes

The quality and quantity of patient demographic and insurance data passing from the hospital's system into yours is an invaluable element of successful billing and collection. Be sure to take a proactive approach to protecting the integrity of this data stream for maximum collection performance. **]]]]**

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