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Chris Belmont, CIO, Ochsner Health Systems, New Orleans, Louisiana, USA
Winds of change

In 2005, when Hurricane Katrina devastated the southern United States, Ochsner Health Systems, based in New Orleans, had already begun consolidating its hospital and clinic operations. When the hurricane left a large number of local healthcare provider’s hospitals and clinics in ruins and local communities without essential healthcare facilities, Ochsner stepped in.

The value of consolidating all medical images into one repository

“Following Katrina, several healthcare providers decided to leave the market, so we acquired a number of hospitals and grew quite aggressively in a short space of time. At the same time, our information systems and organizational structure was not suited for a big health system – one that now numbers eight hospitals and 38 clinics – so we had to come up with a workable plan very fast,” explains Chris Belmont. “Our first actions were to consolidate resources and coordinate the radiology activities across all the different entities. Luckily, we also decided to do the same thing on the information system side instead of having each hospital purchase or acquire its own PACS environment. We had already been working with Agfa HealthCare and by electing to roll radiology together we solidified our partnership. Installing Agfa HealthCare’s integrated ICIS Store allowed us to consolidate medical images into one repository.”

Accessibility from a single viewer

As the first organization to install the ICIS Store, Belmont admits, “The ICIS Store platform was never an issue for us. Our main concern was with getting the right viewer. When you have images that are black and white, color, motion, static, how do you make them accessible from a single viewer? To me, having multiple viewers would have been as difficult as having multiple platforms. It took us five or six tries to get a nice light viewer that is not a technology burden but Agfa HealthCare stuck with us and did a great job of getting us to where we are now with the viewer that we have.”

It is a solution that has already delivered major benefits.

A reputation for continuity of care

“At Ochsner we really stress continuity of care. So, if you see an Ochsner physician at the clinic, get admitted, and then go back to the clinic, all of the records follow you. It has been one of the big positives for our community, our patients and our physicians as well. We reduce duplicate tests and information is available as needed – we don’t have to call across town anymore to have it sent. It is a philosophy we have built our practice on and it is really paying off, both from a quality and a performance perspective.”

Of course, it helped that Ochsner had already been working with Agfa HealthCare on rationalizing records and imaging. “We had already consolidated everything from the clinics and the hospitals — some 20 sites — so the basic foundation was there, and we didn’t have to go out and select a vendor. It was more an expansion than a brand new installation.”

Meeting the challenge of doing more with less

However, it’s not just the winds of Hurricane Katrina that have influenced Ochsner’s recent course. The increasing demands made as a result of the Affordable Care Act, as well as changes that are altering the US healthcare payment structure, increasingly require organizations to do more with less.

“Every year, little by little, we receive less reimbursement for treatment so we are having to change how we look at healthcare”, says Belmont. “We need to look at how we deliver the same services at the same level of quality, but change the delivery model. And technology is going to have a huge impact in enabling us to support that.”

Meaningful Use a major benefit

To that end, one of the major changes Ochsner made last year was to have physicians become more meaningful users of the Electronic Medical Record. “Last year was kept simple”, says Belmont. “Can they do an
Winds of change

Interview with: Chris Belmont, CIO of Ochsner Health Systems in New Orleans

“ICIS Store with ICIS View is an example of the perfect implementation.”
electronic prescription? Can they view an image? 100% of our physicians were able to achieve Meaningful Use in their first year.

“Having that technology in place is now something we can build upon. Of course, just putting technology out there is not enough. We’ve spent a lot of time with our users, understanding it. We recognize that we have to help them migrate to it and help them understand the benefits. More importantly, we have to adapt the functionality to their work flows, so we now have a dedicated team – our Physicians’ Academy – to help with that part of the program.”

Taking time pays dividends

Although well on course for completion, Belmont says, “There are still parts of our systems not yet consolidated – we are about 90% of the way there – but that is more to do with us taking our time to prevent too much disruption. And there are difficult decisions to be made, such as how long to keep images that already go back nearly 10 years; decisions that have to balance quality of patient care with cost and performance. But, overall, I think it is working out pretty well.

ICIS Store with ICIS View - “An example of the perfect implementation”

“I think ICIS Store with ICIS View is an example of the perfect implementation. It’s actually one of the applications we don’t think about a lot because it works. It’s in the background and it runs, and we feel we get the value for the costs. We don’t talk about PACS anymore. We’re not doing many problem resolutions. It’s more about a growth and optimization strategy.”

And Belmont’s advice for anyone else considering a similar solution?

“Aggregating images is definitely the way we go; as is putting them on a single platform. A lot of solutions say they can do that but we have found with the Agfa HealthCare solution that it really does work. It is kind of a non-event. When we elect to put a new type of image into the archive, a few people get together, they make a few decisions and then the data starts to flow. It couldn’t be simpler.”

Patients owning their records will be the industry game changer

Ultimately, Belmont believes that the real game changer will be when it is the patients, rather than the healthcare organizations, that own their records. “We need to make it very seamless so that the owner of the medical record – the patient – can walk into an office and say, ‘here’s a link. Go and pick up my images.’ We are still a little stuck in the fact that the organizations own the records but we need to migrate to where patients own their records. I think that’s the real game changer for this industry.”