Chapter 9

Avera Medical Group Pierre’s Implementation of an eConsult Program: Bringing Specialty Practices to Patients in Rural South Dakota

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The manner in which health care is delivered to patients has evolved significantly through the years. Technology has played an important role in that evolution. This case study explores one way health care organizations are investing in advanced health care technologies to deliver services to patients when the patients are not in the same room as the providers. This study explores the implementation of an eConsult program, also known as telemedicine, at Avera Medical Group Pierre. This study will discuss the process of implementing an eConsult program, the equipment needed to provide eConsults, privacy, and billing concerns, and the facility’s future plans for expanding the telemedicine services they offer. Overall, this case study strives to show that implementing telemedicine can be a relatively easy process of embracing technology, which can greatly benefit patients.

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-4666-2671-3.ch009

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ORGANIZATIONAL BACKGROUND

Avera Medical Group Pierre is located in Pierre, South Dakota. It is a multi-specialty clinic and ambulatory surgical center that provides services to the more than 17,000 residents in Pierre and Fort Pierre areas. More than 30 providers work at Avera Medical Group Pierre. This includes family practice and internal medicine physicians, general surgeons, and specialists in obstetrics and gynecology, orthopedics, urology, podiatry, neurology, and physical medicine and rehabilitation. On an average day, between 200 to 400 patients come through the doors of Avera Medical Group Pierre to use the clinic’s services or to undergo a procedure in the ambulatory surgical center.

Avera Medical Group Pierre was once known as Medical Associates Clinic and was provider-owned and operated. On January 1, 2009, it became part of Avera, which has headquarters in Sioux Falls, South Dakota. Avera McKennan Hospital and several clinics are located in Sioux Falls. Other regional hospitals in the organization, along with additional healthcare facilities, are in 300 locations in South Dakota and the surrounding states. Avera Medical Group Pierre has been in growth mode ever since becoming part of Avera by actively recruiting new physicians and expanding health services the clinic and surgical center offer. Part of that expansion included implementing an eConsult program.

SETTING THE STAGE

Avera Medical Group Pierre has always embraced technology to improve operations. In 2005, the clinic converted its paper medical record process to an Electronic Health Record (EHR) system. As of 2011, approximately 90% of the clinic’s documentation processes take place electronically. The EHR system the clinic integrated has components including computerized physician order entry, a laboratory information system, and a clinical decision support system. The conversion to an EHR has sped up coding and billing, record retrieval, transcription documentation management, and other processes. Technology can also be found in the Radiology Department where staff use a picture archiving and communication system, which has improved operations associated with medical images. The clinic also encourages its patients to use technology. On the clinic’s website are forms for patient information, notice of privacy practices, and HIPAA acknowledgement. Patients can print these forms at their convenience and fill out prior to their appointment at the clinic. This process speeds up registration time, which can be a great benefit for patients who are not feeling well.
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