Utilizing Technology and External Partnerships to Stay Updated on Frequent Payer Changes

Healthcare providers are continuing to develop into larger and more complex entities in order to meet the needs of their patient populations. Because some larger providers can be composed of thousands of moving parts across multiple locations, healthcare leaders trying to find and maintain balance between the number of staff and a high level of efficiency have often turned to technology to fill in the gaps.

For instance, certain duties and responsibilities, such as keeping up to date on the most recent insurance payer policy and procedure changes, can be done more efficiently through using automated technology that proactively alerts providers when policy changes occur.

To learn more about such technology, The Academy recently spoke with Julie Parsell, Manager of Reimbursement Development and Analysis at Washington University School of Medicine in St. Louis, regarding the organization’s recent implementation of payer alerts technology and how staff use this tool to stay informed about the most recent payer changes in order to reduce denials and promote appropriate reimbursement.

Proactively Identifying Changes

Without payer alerts technology, organizations are typically dependent on payers to notify them of changes in policies; some payers do this through a quarterly newsletter, which means providers could be left unaware of some changes for months. A potential solution some providers have tried is assigning existing staff members the additional responsibility of continuously searching online for payer updates. However, with a multitude of commercial and government payers operating nationwide, this duty may encroach upon the time needed for other responsibilities. Another option organizations have tried is hiring one or more FTEs to focus entirely on tracking payer changes—though more efficient, this method still may not be cost-effective. “Each payer has its own website where its provider manual resides,” Parsell says. “It would take at least a fulltime employee to monitor the websites and figure out the changes; we work in a dynamic industry, and things are constantly changing.”

For many organizations, the last resort is to catch payer changes on the back end—that is, discovering a change has been made when a claim is denied for not following the new policy or procedure. While no additional staff or resources are expended, this method requires organizations to appeal and resubmit claims, leading to increased labor demands and more delays in reimbursement.

Ultimately, the implementation of payer alerts technology at Washington University has helped to save time. “There are so many things going on in the healthcare industry that time management is really a huge asset,” Parsell says. “I think that [payer alerts and the need for effective time management] really go along well together because it’s quick, it’s easy, and it’s very useful in a way that you can quickly look at [the alert] and immediately know if you need to make a change.”

Implementing Payer Alerts

Experian Healthcare, the vendor that Washington University had partnered with to handle its contract management needs, also offered a payer alerts service that Parsell saw as a potential opportunity. After securing approval from management, Parsell signed up Washington University for Payer Alerts (both commercial and government payers) and implementation was carried out over two weeks. The technology is web-based and requires no hardware or software installation, expediting the go-live process. An organization partnering with this vendor can receive and view daily alerts via a digest email and/or a secure web portal.

Most of the roll-out time was spent on educating staff about what the alerts are, the benefits they could provide, and how to sign up. “I emailed a PowerPoint presentation explaining Payer Alerts and made suggestions,” Parsell explains.
“[For instance], the coding managers would probably be interested in coding [alerts] over authorizations.” After cataloging who had signed up for the alerts and the specific types of alerts they wanted, Parsell sent the information to the vendor, who was able to set up the alerts in just two days.

Additionally, Payer Alerts are not limited to only management or department leaders. “We don’t have a stipulation that you have to be at level X,” Parsell says. “If anybody wants an alert, they can get it.” Allowing front-line staff (e.g., billers, coders) to receive alerts alleviates the need to wait for updates or reports from managers or department leaders, speeding up work time and efficiency. Initially, 83 individuals signed up to receive Payer Alerts, with 20 more users added since implementation.

Customizing Alerts

The continued success of the alerts, according to Parsell, can be attributed to the high flexibility and customizability that the vendor permits. These characteristics helped allay a concern that some staff members had about the alerts—that a daily stream of e-mails might become overwhelming or simply lost among all the other papers and notices. To prevent the alerts from affecting regular work, they can be set up to be received at a certain time—such as early morning or late evening. Organizations can also opt not to receive a daily email and simply visit the web portal at each individual’s convenience. Further, by customizing the alerts to be relevant for each specific recipient, it is much more likely that the alert will be read. “A lot of times you just get overwhelmed with too much information—how do I weed it out?” Parsell explains. “But when you can specialize it and get it down to the level that’s specific to a person’s area, it’s really great.”

The ease of use also extends to adding new payers or modifying accounts. Regardless of the size or location of the payers that Washington University works with, the vendor can create an alert for them. “When we signed a new contract with a smaller, local payer, I went ahead and just asked, ‘I would like for you to add this payer—can you add it to all of our users?’ And they did it within two days,” Parsell says.

Due to the number of health insurance options that providers may encounter, it can be difficult to keep informed of all policy and billing changes—even with a dedicated staff member or team assigned to this duty. By investing in payer alerts technology, an organization’s leaders, managers, and staff can all stay abreast of changes while reducing the amount of time spent on this function—which can increase overall efficiency, lower denial rates, and promote appropriate reimbursement at first pass.

Payer Alert Example

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<tr>
<th>Medicaid Kansas / Department of Health and Environment</th>
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<tr>
<td>Heart and Lung Transplant (134676)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Effective 01/01/2013 – Administrative, Clerical, Reimbursement</td>
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Effective with dates of service on and after January 1, 2013, Kansas Medicaid will cover heart, heart-lung, and lung transplants for adult beneficiaries when the beneficiary meets the transplanting institution’s eligibility requirement. Heart, heart-lung, and lung transplants for adult beneficiaries will require prior authorization and must be performed by Medicare-approved facilities or facilities that are members of the United Network for Organ Sharing (UNOS). To view the information, click on the link below.

Payer Alerts—sent to staff via email or accessible through a web portal—help staff stay updated on payer changes.