

CASE STUDY:

Urology of Greater Atlanta

Optimizing patient collections: A strategic imperative for practice

CHALLENGE

- Like most physician practices, Urology of Greater Atlanta began seeing more patients enrolled in high-deductible health plans, making it increasingly necessary to capture patient financial responsibility quickly and cost-effectively.

SOLUTIONS

- Waystar® Payments™ facilitates the collection of co-pays, co-insurance, and unmet deductibles through the creation of automatic payment plans by securely storing a patient's debit/credit card information and charging the card once financial responsibility is determined.

RESULTS

- Just six weeks after implementation, Urology of Greater Atlanta has already seen positive results in simplifying and unifying their revenue cycle, including less paperwork, increased efficiency and encouraging feedback from patients.

The choice

With good reason, patient collections have risen to the top of practice leadership's list of strategic priorities. Patients are shouldering a larger portion of their healthcare cost with more than 75% of individuals with commercial health plans enrolled in high-deductible plans.¹ Additionally, a recent study shows that 83% of physician practices under five practitioners noted that slow payments from high-deductible plan patients are their top challenge.² As a result, practices must leverage new payment processes and technologies for better results.

Urology of Greater Atlanta is no exception to this rule.

“Practices can't exclusively rely on the reimbursement they receive from payers anymore. In many cases, if you are not able to collect from the patient, you won't get paid for the service at all, particularly if the patient has a high-deductible plan,” says Cheris Craig, chief administrative officer at Urology of Greater Atlanta.

Consequently, the organization already had several established processes in place to improve collections; in addition to collecting co-payments at time-of-service, it offered manual payment plans to facilitate difficult postservice payments. With an increasing percentage of revenue coming from patients, leadership wanted to raise the bar even higher.

Waystar Solution

Innovative technology to support best practices in patient collections –

While time-of-service collections and payment plans are certainly best practices, Cheris and her team wanted to implement a more strategic, all-encompassing initiative to optimize the entire collections cycle through technology and process improvements. When one of the physicians

¹ AHIP, “2016 Survey of Health Savings Account – High Deductible Health Plans,” 2016. https://www.ahip.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/2016_HSASurvey_Draft_2.14.17.pdf.

² Black Book, “Providers Driven to Implement Patient-Centric Financial Solutions as Consumer Payment Responsibility Skyrockets 29 Percent, Black Book Survey,” 2017.

CASE STUDY: UROLOGY OF GREATER ATLANTA

suggested offering online bill payment, it highlighted the opportunity to improve the collections process for both patients and staff.

She began exploring options and discovered Waystar, and its patient payment solution, Waystar Payments. Urology of Greater Atlanta already had a longstanding relationship with Waystar; in 2010, the organization switched to its payer billing and payment solutions to help simplify and unify many financial processes that had become arduous and time-consuming. As a result, the organization had improved eligibility verification, claims management, patient statements and electronic remittance advice

Cheris was impressed by Waystar Payments—especially the Greenlight™ feature, which automates payment by securely storing patient credit/debit card or bank draft information and charging it after patient financial responsibility is determined. “Waystar Payments is similar to PayPal® but simpler and more robust,” explains Cheris. “It provides a faster, easier way to set up one-time or automated recurring payments, and its payment plan option is much more effective than our former method.” Cheris notes that as a result, the team spends much less time and money collecting from patients.

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Results

Optimizing Payment Processes from Pre-Service to Payment in Full – In While the team was accustomed to collecting co-payments, Waystar’s end-to-end time-of-service collection and online patient payments provided the opportunity for comprehensive process improvement. This process initiative had two goals: First, it would promote staff productivity and efficiency, and second, it would increase collections.

The new process begins at time-of-service; the staff creates a Greenlight account for each patient, which takes just a few minutes. This account allows the practice to collect patient co-pays at the time-of-service. Post adjudication, Greenlight facilitates a one-time transaction, or if the patient chooses, it generates a payment plan that automatically charges the patient’s card at pre-determined intervals. Because technology automates the entire payment process, from time-of-service collection through the set-up and receipt of recurring payments, the staff can now devote more time and effort to a critical component: education of financial responsibility and discussion of expectations. The staff counsels patients regarding estimates, presents new financial policies and helps patients select the ideal payment arrangement.

Previously, staff relied on the practice management system to generate a payment plan coupon book, and patients had to mail payments each month along with a coupon. Now, patients sign up for plans that can spread payments over three, six or twelve months, depending on the size of the final bill. “We have found that if we don’t set some parameters around the number of installments, many patients wouldn’t be finished paying for one service before scheduling another one,” explains Cheris.

“Now, the payment plan runs on auto-pilot until the balance is paid, which greatly reduces the amount of time our staff spends on collections,” says Cheris. She notes that in the past, patients signed up for payment plans but never actually paid.

Additionally, the practice has been able to capture more accurate revenue through the Greenlight process. This component of technology automation is particularly important as it denotes another key best practice. Post-ser-

CASE STUDY: UROLOGY OF GREATER ATLANTA

vice patient payments are notoriously difficult and costly to collect, so patients and staff benefit from proactive, automated collections that require little or no activity. As a result, staff isn't generating and mailing multiple paper statements, spending time on the phone with patients or sending as many outstanding bills to third-party collections. On the other hand, patients have given permission at time-of-service for the provider to collect; therefore, they don't need to mail payments or even log on to a website for online bill payment.

Consumer-Friendly Payment Practices Lead to Efficiency Gains Urology of Greater Atlanta has also borrowed consumer-friendly billing practices from other industries. For instance, to boost participation in the automated payment plan option, Urology of Greater Atlanta reduced its standard payment plan fees and continued to offer budget-friendly options like 90 days same as cash. As a result, their patients feel like they are getting a great deal with the discount and are more likely to enroll and pay faster.

The team is pleased with the early results related to efficiency and productivity gains. Since patients no longer have to send in payments or coupons, there's significantly less paperwork to manage, giving staff more time to spend on other mission-critical tasks. She also notes that overall, the patient feedback has been positive—an important point, as patient satisfaction can potentially impact payments.

Impact

The next step: A greater commitment to consumer-friendly payment practices – Since implementation in the central billing office, Urology of Greater Atlanta expanded its use of Greenlight to include seven additional office locations. In the coming months, the practice plans to finalize implementation in its surgical center and their two remaining office locations. The practice will also continue its process improvement initiative with a new financial policy.

"The Greenlight process will not be optional," explains Cheri. "If a patient chooses not to participate or refuses to provide a credit or debit card, they will be charged an administrative fee to cover the expenses associated with generating and mailing paper state-

ments." While financial and credit card industries, for example, have often provided incentives for automated, online payments (or additional costs for paper-based statements), this practice is less common in healthcare.

By taking this approach, Urology of Greater Atlanta believes it will be able to eliminate the cost and staff time associated with patient statements and dramatically reduce collection efforts. "We also anticipate seeing improved cash flow," adds Cheri.

Empowering patients – So far, one of the biggest benefits of Greenlight is that it allows Urology of Greater Atlanta to get paid at the time-of-service like any other business.

"By setting patient expectations upfront about what their financial obligations will be, we are empowering them to take more responsibility for their care," says Cheri.

One of the keys to the practice's success has been the time it spent training staff on how to inform and educate patients about the new payment policies. "We knew our staff would have to adjust to the idea of telling patients they need to pay upfront, so we devoted a significant amount of time to training," says Cheri. "We emphasized the importance of being confident during conversations about finances and not waffling when discussing our policies." Whether communicating with patients in person or on the phone, staff explains how these new policies benefit everyone. Aside from being more convenient for patients, it minimizes work for the practice and reduces the overall cost of care, which is good for providers and patients alike.

Tips for ensuring success – The practice also credits several other best practices for its smooth and successful implementation. These include:

1. Securing buy-in - With seven different physicians—each with different attitudes regarding patient payment—it was imperative to get everyone on the same page regarding financial policies prior to the deployment. By showing a number of other practices—both

CASE STUDY: UROLOGY OF GREATER ATLANTA

in the local market and beyond—were taking similar steps, they were able to strike a balance that worked for all stakeholders.

2. Being transparent- A key aspect of the Urology of Greater Atlanta's new payment process is being able to provide patients with accurate estimates of their financial obligations. By doing so, the practice can provide full transparency, easily answer patient questions about fees and prevent surprises down the road.

3. Staying proactive- "Making the move to time-of-service collections is a big but necessary change," says Cheris. While it does represent a major culture shift, the practice knows it can no longer afford to take a reactive, wait-and-see approach when it comes to patient payment. By capturing revenue from patients as early in the process as possible, Urology of Greater Atlanta can ensure their financial sustainability for many years to come.

"We had to get over the idea of not wanting to ask patients for money," says Cheris. "In today's environment, a practice's financial survival depends on how well they are able to collect from patients and educate them about what they owe."

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