A Coding Wellspring for Val Verde Regional Medical Center

Just outside of the hot desert city of Del Rio, Texas, home of Val Verde Regional Medical Center (VVRMC), the cool San Felipe Springs emerge from the ground and feed San Felipe Creek, a constant source of sustenance and renewal to the local environment and community. In 2015, VVRMC sought another source of sustenance to improve its ailing coding operations.

Following ongoing financial challenges, Val Verde Regional Medical Center (VVRMC) appointed a new CEO, Xochy Hurtado, in July 2015. This wave of change also brought Brad Jones into the organization in December 2015 as HIM Director and Privacy Officer to help reinvigorate the coding operation.

Jones discovered that the struggling coding group needed more training and resources to help them succeed. VVRMC was also challenged by a non-compliant medical staff regarding documentation timeliness and completeness, hindering coders from administering the coding techniques they did know. The result – the accuracy, productivity, and ultimately, revenue, fell short of expectations shared by Jones and the senior leadership team. The issues were manifested in five red flags noted by Jones:

VVRMC is a Center for Improvement in Healthcare Quality-accredited, 93-bed, level IV trauma center serving Del Rio, Texas, and the neighboring communities.

- Lack of pathways and education to achieve coder certification
- Relatively high Discharged Not Final Billed (DNFB), averaging 13 to 14 days
- Coding-related denials were common
- Deficient assignment of Complicating or Comorbid Condition (CC), Major Complicating or Comorbid Condition (MCC), Severity of Illness and Risk of Mortality
- Lower than anticipated reimbursement levels

A FULL CIRCLE REMEDY

Although VVRMC had used temporary outsourced coders to augment its team until the current systematic issues were addressed, Jones and VVRMC sought a more complete remedy to their coding pains. Since Del Rio is a small, rural community, the availability of local certified coders was limited. After reviewing options, VVRMC management selected nThrive as its partner to fully outsource the coding function.

The nThrive coding team launched services January 4, 2016. Go-live included a coding manager, who started onsite and then transitioned into a remote role on the team. "Having the nThrive coding manager in-person every day for the first six weeks made for a successful implementation of the coding solution; the manager built solid rapport with all the players who interface with the coding team," remarked Jones. Following initial on-site time, the nThrive Coding Manager held weekly calls with Jones to ensure clear communication and timely attention to any needs.

As the new remote coding team settled in, and the previous coding team members were reassigned to more suitable non-coding roles, greater emphasis on improving accuracy and productivity became the focus. The coders collaborated with CDI specialists and VVRMC's new Coding Liaison to produce clear and complete clinical documentation that would lead to improved coding outcomes. "The nThrive team really focused on the accuracy and charts-by-hour productivity standards we put in place," said Jones.

A FINANCIAL TURNAROUND

The nThrive team adopted VVRMC's concurrent inpatient coding practice, coding while the patient was still in-house, in order to help address VVRMC's DNFB issues. Just 120 days after implementation of the coding outsource team, nThrive reduced VVRMC's AR days by 36 percent (five days), achieving the CFO's goal. This threshold continues to be sustained. Additionally, coding-related denials have been minimized and more accurate assignment of CC, MCCs, Severity of Illness and Risk of Mortality has become a standard practice.

Several months after the nThrive team was deployed, a more profound improvement was realized. After many months in the red financially in 2015, in 2016 VVRMC was in the black. "In large part to nThrive's improvements in coding performance," remarked Jones, "VVRMC's overall financial performance went from monthly losses to gains."

VVRMC is pleased with the financial wellspring nThrive's coding team has delivered and are exploring ways to expand the current partnership. "Not only did nThrive help our coding operations, but they also made helpful recommendations for overall revenue cycle performance," said Jones. "nThrive brings a much bigger platter of solutions to the table than just coding services, such as CDI consulting and on-line education, which we will be taking advantage of soon."

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