



Exclusive interviews with AAMI's Logan and SNM's Delbeke



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ISR: Stress Test

Image courtesy of
Nasiff Associates

Stress test industry update: legal & connectivity woes

By Olga Deshchenko

Insurer that denied stress tests violated state law

Blue Cross Blue Shield of Delaware caught a lot of heat recently for denying what may have been medically necessary diagnostic cardiac stress tests, prompting investigations by both the state's insurance commissioner and the U.S. Senate Committee on Commerce, Science and Transportation.

This April, Delaware's Department of Insurance released its report, which found that BCBSD violated state law by signing a contract with MedSolutions, a company that guaranteed the insurer would slash costs through denials of high-tech imaging tests.

According to the report, MedSolutions denied nearly 30 percent of the requests to cover nuclear stress tests. The insurer's preauthorization program also required physicians to prove the tests were necessary before paying for them.

And Avi E. Soffer, CEO of University Nuclear and Diagnostics, says Delaware isn't the only state with troubling denials of critical diagnostic tests -- it's happening nationwide.

According to Soffer, many payers use the health care reform's goal of trimming the "excess" and controlling costs across system to underpay or completely deny coverage for procedures like nuclear stress tests.

At the same time as the Department of Insurance released its findings, the Senate shared its summary report on preauthorization in Delaware. It pointed the finger at payers and clinicians, scolding them for not putting patients first.

The Senate's investigation was triggered by a patient named Michael Fields, who was denied nuclear stress tests twice in January of 2010. He was eventually admitted to a hospital and received bypass surgery. The Senate report found that Fields' preauthorization procedure "unnecessarily delayed care for his life-threatening medical condition."

Prompted by the investigations, BCBSD said in April it would modify its policies -- doctors no longer need to obtain preauthorization for nuclear stress tests for the members of the insurance plan.

According to Soffer, a diagnostic stress test is one of the most vital tools in the hands of cardiologists. "It is arguably their most important diagnostic [exam] and certainly the number one contributor to the decrease in cardiovascular disease and detection of ischemia," he says.

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The quest for painless integration

In the transition to electronic medical records, providers aren't the only ones who need to deal with changes -- equipment manufacturers must also reconfigure their offerings to meet the new requirements for their customers.

And stress test systems are no exception. Since the advent of EMRs, there has been a bigger focus on information retrieval and sharing that's fast and easy.

Currently, a major challenge in the stress test industry is workflow and connectivity to an EMR, says Michael Moore, vice president of sales with Nasiff Associates.

According to Moore, analogue systems are being phased out in favor of PC-based systems in today's test market but many physicians are yet to catch up with the latest PC-based units. For customers who have older diagnostic systems, the transition to a paperless system can be an expensive process.

For manufacturers to offer providers a system that best fits their evolving needs, companies must work with EMR vendors, which is not always easy. "There are approximately 250 different EMR companies and there is no standard in the industry in which one device will communicate with a software company," says Moore.

When it comes to connecting a stress test unit to an EMR, Moore says customers have two options: interface and compatibility. "The interface will save a couple of clicks and generally comes with an annual fee to the customer from an EMR com-

pany," he explains.

On the other hand, the compatibility option has no annual fee and requires no integration with the EMR vendor -- it seamlessly runs parallel to the electronic health record. (The Nasiff CardioCard software is compatible with 98 percent of the EMR companies, according to Moore.)

If working and coordinating with numerous EMR vendors wasn't challenging enough, stress test equipment companies must also function in a realm that lacks a waveforms standard. Test results can widely vary in file formats, including XML, JPEG, PDF and TIFF.

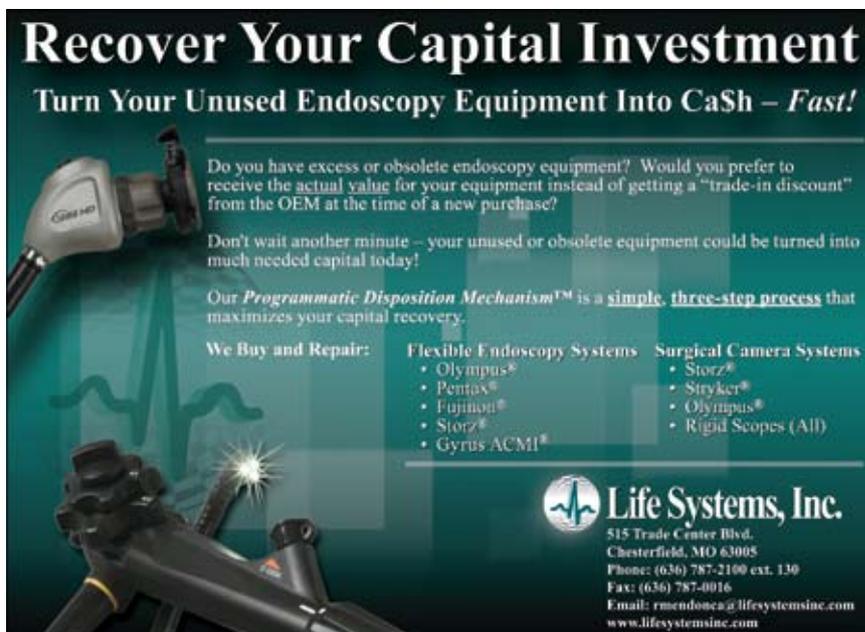
Although there is an ongoing ef-

fort to standardize an HL7 format across the industry, Moore doesn't anticipate it will happen for several years. For now, manufacturers are focused on ensuring EMR connectivity, without the burden of additional costs for providers.

And the emphasis on improving the workflow in light of EMRs, says Moore, has created a shift in the industry. Manufacturers are not only providing stress test products but broader, customized solutions for their customers.

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