



Keeping an Eye On the Flow

ANTHONY SANZO, CEO, President and Director of Tele-Tracking Technologies, says hospitals in the U.S. are still on their way to mastering patient flow and capacity management. He shares his insights on what can be done to improve this process in hospitals.

What is the current state of patient flow and capacity management in hospitals and healthcare institutions in the U.S.? Are we still struggling to provide patients with the care they need when they need it? Have healthcare providers taken initiatives to alleviate this challenge?

At Tele-Tracking, we often ask ourselves, “Have hospital executives made patient flow a priority in this country?” Our answer is that they are getting there. What we have seen over the past few years has been remarkable in terms of the amount of the attention that executives and interest groups are giving to the whole issue of patient flow and the lacking thereof. There is concern that the absence of patient flow can cause a disastrous effect on the system, but more importantly to the patients and their families. We are making great strides in improving patient flow within healthcare institutions in the U.S., but we have a long way to go. Hospitals from time to time struggle to provide patients with the care they need when they need it; not for lack of efforts but for lack of a good system design. One of the things we look to do in order to help our clients is look at the design and processes that hospitals use to manage patient flow and find out how we can help them streamline their processes to make them more efficient, effective, and where possible, automated.

How important is technology’s role in streamlining patient flow and maximizing ROI for a facility? What kinds of solutions does Tele-Tracking offer in terms of utilizing technologies to improve patient flow and capacity management?

This is the year 2007; technology is very important in many of the things that we do, including streamlining patient flow. Whether or not we look at technology for maximizing ROI for a facility, the first thing that we must look at is the impact on the level of care. Our motto is: “Why should we improve patient flow? Because improved patient flow equals improved patient care.” We think technology is important because it has the ability to do things in a fashion that human beings cannot do. The Health Advisory Board published a document within the past year that very concisely stated that there are three reasons why we should look toward technology for improving patient flow. The first is to increase visibility; the second is to improve communication; and the third is to improve accountability.

No matter the size of the hospital, no one can see every hospital bed at all times of the day. When we talk about improving visibility, what we are talking about is virtually seeing through the walls and the ceilings of the hospital so we know the status of each bed at all times during the day. The status of the bed is important because if we have someone on a gurney in the emergency department, someone in the recovery room and someone in the lobby all waiting for a bed, we need to know the status of the bed. To know that the bed is vacant is simply not enough. We want to know if the bed is vacant and clean, vacant and in the state of being clean, and whether or not it has negative or positive pressure. Technology allows hospital staff to know the status of each bed at all points of the day in real-time – and that’s visibility.

If you were to walk into most hospitals in the U.S. and spend a half hour doing a simple flowchart on the process of requesting a bed, having a bed assigned and having the bed assigned communicated to the individual who requested the bed, you would be amazed at the mass confusion and the number of duplicated steps for each assignment that occur in every hospital throughout the day. Technology can automate the paging process, provide electronic alerts to let people know what is happening when it happens and create a workflow for the staff’s convenience – all with the patient’s best interest in mind.

Technology based on computers provides time stamps. If we know that today it takes us on average six and a half hours to get a patient into a bed, but we believe that it should only take two hours, we can look at each segment of the process to determine where the bottlenecks are. Once we know this information, we can apply effort and management tools to improve that segment of the process. We can hold people accountable and communicate to them what their purpose is as it relates to the flow of the patient’s care. If each person knew precisely what their role was, they would be far more willing to work efficiently to meet the needs of the patient.

Hospital employees come to work each day with the intention of doing good things. The only thing we need to do is provide them with the tools and processes to enable them to do so.

The waste that occurs in hospitals with poorly managed patient flow is remarkable. The return on investment for redesigning workflow processes that improve patient flow and then automate it is almost immediate. We have had several clients who have expressed to us that their return was in the millions of dollars. I can assure that neither Tele-Tracking nor any of our competitors charge in the millions of dollars for our services and applications.

Tele-Tracking offers solutions that fall under two categories: The first category is general process improvement. Through our consulting division, Avanti Patient Flow Services, we help our clients and our prospective clients to think through the process changes that they need to make. We do this independently



or consistent and in cooperation with many consulting firms. The second component of the solutions that we offer is the technology itself. Our key product is called the Capacity Management Solution. This product combines bed efficiency, transport efficiency, and electronic bedboard and placement technology. They are fully integrated solutions and we now have over 650 clients that rely on this technology to help them manage and improve process flow.

What are some reasons that providers would be hesitant to implement new technologies and efforts to improve patient flow and capacity management? Are there any impediments to utilizing technologies?

There are no real impediments to utilizing technology. This technology is very user-friendly, intuitive and effective. The biggest reason why some providers are hesitant to implement new technologies is the fear of change. It is difficult to manage complex organizations and call on an organization to change the way they look at and think about certain processes. However, they must realize that this change can absolutely be done. As executives, our responsibilities are to the people we serve. In hospitals, the people we serve are generally patients, and therefore communities.

Improved flow results in improved care. Whether or not it is difficult for an organization to accept the cultural changes required to improve flow and understand the patient’s needs is tantamount to improving the patient’s experience, and in essence their outcomes. Until we accept that fact and take responsibility for the burning platform for change, any major process change is going to be difficult.

Beyond cultural change there is no reason that organizations hesitate to implement new technologies. What they may do is create a series of priorities in order to meet budgetary requirements, and they may not think that improving patient flow through a technological solution and process change is their highest priority in a given fiscal year. My view is that patient flow has gotten a lot of public attention in the past few years and as a result, there is going to be increased pressure on hospitals to improve their flow. We have seen the level of priority assigned to patient flow steadily increase. As this happens, improving hospital flow will overcome any budgetary challenge and the barrier to change.

What should healthcare leaders look for when they evaluate and select a patient flow solution? What should be their selection criteria? How does Tele-Tracking’s solution hold up against these criteria?

Healthcare leaders should look for a solution that works. There are many products and solutions on the market, but I don’t know that they all work. Then they must look at how the provider improves patient flow. Some key ways to measure this is if they allow the hospitals to admit more patients given a fixed resource over a defined period of time. Do they eliminate or at least mitigate ED holds and OR holds. An OR hold is when a case gets delayed primarily because there is no room to take another patient out of the post-anesthesia recovery room and put them into a patient bed, which backs up everything else. What we need to prove is our ability to lessen the number of holds and moreover, cancellations. Furthermore, we must provide the effective visibility, communication and measurement tools that allow for accountability, data and information record in order to improve processes over time.

Long before I became a part of this team, Tele-Tracking defined the whole concept of automating patient flow. We have dedicated the last 17 years to understanding the needs of hospitals and how to help them improve flow. We have built a large client base using over 1,400 solutions. We have done so by listening, reinvesting our earnings into redevelopment, and by creating a support staff on the training, implementation and tech support sides. Our best reference is our client base; we have over a 95 percent client retention rate which is a testament to our longevity.

Should facilities look at implementation of technology and process improvement plans as two separate initiatives to improve patient flow? How can technology and process improvement work hand-in-hand to advance capacity management?

This is a question that we commonly field from a prospective client. A technology solution is only as good as the people who use it, and for that reason, conventional wisdom would tell us to improve our process then automate it. We would counter with, “How do you know how good your process can be if you don’t understand automation?” It takes a lot of time and effort to analyze the current workflow processes and redesign them in a fashion that eliminates waste. There is no reason to do this if a hospital doesn’t know what they are eliminating by virtue of understanding the technological solutions that will enhance the redesigned process. For that reason, our organization believes that these sets of tools are complimentary. We don’t think automation should be done without a process change, and we don’t think a process change should be done without automation. At precisely the same time that we start to understand the current workflow process, we need to understand how it can be improved both through process change and then through automation.



Anthony Sanzo, CEO, President and Director of Tele-Tracking Technologies, brings a solid understanding of the operational challenges faced by hospitals. Since 1980, he has held senior and executive positions for two major academic medical centers and was named CEO for one of those institutions. Prior to joining Tele-Tracking, he co-founded two healthcare consulting companies – Ethos Capital LLC and Transition Management Group. Anthony is Chairman of Net Health Systems Inc., a health informatics company providing disease state management tools; and Chairman of Advanced Vital Services Inc., a wound care technology and services company providing tools for the early diagnosis of pressure ulcers.