

# Dermatology Associates, PSC Moves Forward with a New Practice Management System

BY JESSICA CRANE, CMA, CPC, CDC

It is inevitable. Medical groups that depend on old practice management software to administer their business operations will come to the realization that they have to move forward with a new system. The inefficiencies and limitations of old systems that run on outmoded technology platforms impose costs on practice operations that at some point can no longer be tolerated. Dermatology Associates, PSC reached that point when software support concerns with our practice management system obliged us to find a new alternative. Moving forward with an up-to-date system has helped us run our practice more efficiently and effectively.

## When Push Came to Shove

Dermatology Associates, PSC has served the Louisville, Kentucky community for a quarter century. Our providers specialize in diseases of the skin, hair, and nails. Located in the east end of Louisville, a middle- to upper-income area, the group is a full-service dermatology practice dedicated to providing solutions for all of our patients' skin care needs. All five physicians in the practice are Fellows of the American Academy of Dermatology and are certified by the American Board of Dermatology. We have three male physicians and two women physicians who are also board-certified

pediatric dermatologists. Thus, while we have a diverse patient population, the majority of our patients are women age 35 to 50 and children, infants to adolescents. In terms of payer mix, 67 percent of our patients have private insurance coverage, 30 percent rely on Medicare and Medicaid, and 3 percent are self-pay.

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## MOVING FORWARD WITH AN UP-TO-DATE SYSTEM HAS HELPED US RUN OUR PRACTICE MORE EFFICIENTLY AND EFFECTIVELY.

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We had used Medical Manager as our practice management system for about 15 years. In general, we had effectively managed our business operations with that system. However, in 2004, system problems forced Dermatology Associates to look for a new solution.

Our nagging problems were related to system speed and reliability as well as limited reporting. With many dumb terminals connected to one server, response time for our users was slow. The system would crash every few months. It would take us anywhere from 30 minutes to 2 or more hours to rebuild files and reboot the system to get it to run properly. Slow response time and system downtime in a busy medical office choke productivity. As for reporting, the software's reporting

module was too inflexible due to limited data selection criteria when we ran reports.

Support issues proved to be the final problem that compelled our group to initiate a new system search. When national provider identifiers were introduced, we could not get clear answers on whether the version of the software we were running would be modified to handle the identifiers and for how long it would continue to be supported and updated. That was troublesome and frustrating. Without the ability to enter and maintain national provider identifiers for our physicians, and for referring physicians as well, we would not be able to process bills. That was untenable.

## Moving on to Find a New System

System stability, speed, and user-friendliness were Dermatology Associates' basic priorities for a new practice management system. Given our old system's reporting limitations, reporting flexibility was also essential. In addition to these basic requirements, our medical group focused in on particular features and functions for a new solution. Specifically, we wanted easier appointment scheduling and schedule template creation. Since we had been doing electronic billing, we also wanted to be sure that we could continue to use the same clearing-

house with our new practice management system. And given our support problems, we had to choose a vendor that is committed to software support and upgrades.

The system search, evaluation, and selection process took almost 15 months. Our business office team leader and I managed the process ourselves. She also does double-duty as a biller. It proved to be difficult for the two of us to get time away from our daily duties at the same time on the same days. It seemed that whenever we would set aside time to work on identifying vendors and assessing alternatives, one of us would have to get back to our primary management responsibilities.

We evaluated five vendors and systems in detail. During the system presentations and demonstrations, we paid close attention to visual appeal. After all, our employees would be looking at that those screens for seven or eight hours a day. We felt that there were some systems that had good functionality, but they were very hard on the eyes when they were presented on screen. We also had to be sure that a new system would be easy to use, as we had several employees who did not have substantial computer knowledge or PC experience. We did not want them to be overwhelmed and frustrated.

Medical Software Associates (MSA), which provides computer system support to Dermatology Associates, is a value-added reseller for Henry Schein Medical Systems and introduced their MicroMD PM application as one of the solutions to be considered. We ended up choosing it as our group's new practice management system. MicroMD PM met all our requirements, and it is updated on regular basis. In addition, with this system we could continue to get local training help and technical assistance from MSA, which maintains an

office in Louisville. That was a major decision factor for us and increased our comfort level in going forward with the product. Finally, the software was much more affordable; other alternatives we considered would have cost at least 45 percent more.

### **New System, Better Performance**

As noted, Dermatology Associates was a well-run practice even with our old system. We had maintained effective control of our financials before implementation. So what improvements have we realized with our new system?

First, the system is reliable and has not crashed even once in the two-plus years since it was fully implemented. In addition, reporting is faster and more flexible. The monthly reports we used to run would take two or three hours to complete, but now we run the same reports, plus many more we have added, in under an hour. We also have the flexibility to assemble any data we need to track and assess our operations and finances.

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**THERE IS NO DOUBT THAT FINDING AND IMPLEMENTING A NEW SYSTEM TAKES A GREAT DEAL OF TIME AND EFFORT—IN OUR CASE, TOO MUCH OF BOTH.**

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Second, we had previously processed about 50-60 percent of our claims electronically. We have improved that to 90 percent, thereby speeding up reimbursement and boosting our cash flow.

Third, mistakes are easier to correct. That makes the system easier and faster to use. For instance, when a scheduler would accidentally cancel a patient's appointment with our old system, the information was gone. They had to start over and re-enter all the information. Now, the inadvertently canceled appointment goes

into a clipboard and can be restored with a mouse click. That saves time.

Fourth, Dermatology Associates achieved the scheduling flexibility we had sought in a new practice management system. Creating and customizing schedule templates has saved us several hours every month, and we can also quickly adjust any physician's schedule. Once a scheduler established a schedule template in the old software, it was difficult and time-consuming to change. In contrast, our users can now create and save schedule templates, and applying a different template for physicians is simple. They just select the saved template they want, enter a date range for it, and it is applied.

### **Lessons Learned and Shared**

It fair to say that medical groups have a tendency to persist in struggling with outmoded practice management software long after system issues and software limitations have become obvious. This is understandable. It is easy, perhaps too easy, to become accustomed to poor performance. Plus, there is no doubt that finding and implementing a new system takes a great deal of time and effort—in our case, too much of both.

In retrospect, we would have liked to have made our selection process go forward much more quickly. And we could have. We should have had a representative from each department involved in evaluating software and then meet as a group to discuss the pros and cons of each. Sharing the responsibility would have eased the burden on the two of us who had overall accountability for the process. Involving more of our staff would have also helped us to secure support for the new system ultimately selected.

It is important to anticipate and manage possible resistance to change. Implementing a new prac-

tice management system can be stressful for office managers and employees. When a medical group evaluates alternatives and chooses a new system today, you will surely go with Microsoft Windows-based software for system stability and scalability as well as ease of use. Paradoxically, that can provoke resistance and create training problems. In particular, older employees who are not PC-savvy may grow accustomed to the outdated technology with which they are familiar. They may prefer the keystroke commands of old Unix-based systems rather than learning to use a computer mouse.

Identify the people you think may be most hesitant or resistant so that you can start the orientation and training process with them in mind. Provide additional help tailored to their needs. At Dermatology Associates, we

concentrated on long-time employees who had only worked on our old system and those who were not acquainted with Windows. We anticipated that group training sessions might be too fast-paced and confusing for them and that they could be reluctant to ask questions in a group setting. Supplementing group training with individual, one-on-one orientation helped alleviate anxiety and overcome the problem of information overload which some of our employees did indeed experience in group training sessions. Something as simple as allowing one of our employees to play solitaire on her new PC enabled her to more easily get comfortable using a computer mouse.

A solid practice management system is essential for any medical group committed to sustaining practice excellence. Change always involves risk. When choosing a new

system, you have to make a good decision. You can afford nothing less. That is why it is important to look for a vendor with a good reputation and a long track record of providing regular updates to its system with enhancements that take users' comments and requests into account. If your group practice has a long-established relationship with an IT consultant, as Dermatology Associates does, choosing a new system for which your consultant can offer local implementation services and support goes a long way toward providing an extra measure of reassurance as you move forward with a new practice management system.

*Jessica Crane, CMA, CPC, CDC, is office manager, Dermatology Associates, Louisville, Kentucky.*