Credentialed Medical Assistants Aid in Meaningful Use Compliance and Increase Office Efficiency

With the recent Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS) Meaningful Use rule, the office can now delegate the entry of physician orders into the EHR system to credentialed medical assistants and therefore increase office efficiency.

What is Meaningful Use?
The Meaningful Use rule was adopted as part of a series of regulations implementing the Health Information Technology for Economic and Clinical Health (HITECH) Act. Under that law, doctors, healthcare professionals and hospitals can qualify for Medicare and Medicaid incentive payments when they adopt and meaningfully use certified electronic health record (EHR) technology. In order to qualify for the incentives, medical offices must continue to demonstrate substantial integration of their EHR system into their practice workflow, and must continue to increase their usage of the EHR system. The HITECH Act also imposes Medicare payment penalties on providers who don’t meet meaningful use standards by the year 2015.

The program is divided into three stages:
- Stage 1 sets the basic functionalities electronic health records must include such as capturing data electronically and providing patients with electronic copies of health information.
- Stage 2 (which will begin as early as 2014) increases health information exchange between providers and promotes patient engagement by giving patients secure online access to their health information.
- Stage 3 will continue to expand meaningful use objectives to improve health care outcomes.

In each stage CMS establishes a number of “core objectives” and measures to achieve those objectives. Objectives established at one stage are carried over, often with modifications, into the subsequent stages.

What is the Specific Reference to Medical Assistants?
One of the final Stage 2 core objectives allows “credentialed medical assistants” to enter orders into the Computerized Physician Order Entry (CPOE) system for medication and for laboratory and radiology services. Previously, these entries could only be done by licensed providers. CMS extended the group of personnel permitted to enter orders to include only one non-licensed professional group – appropriately credentialed medical assistants.

CMS has recognized the unique and important role played by certified MAs in the healthcare delivery system, and the attributes that set them apart from other allied health personnel. Although CMS did not specify what type of credential a medical assistant would be required to have, it imposed an important condition: the credential must be obtained from an organization other than the MA’s employer.

AMT’s Registered Medical Assistant (RMA) certification, which is accredited by the National Commission for Certifying Agencies (NCCA), meets this condition.

What Does This Mean in the Office Environment?
Appropriately credentialed medical assistants can add considerable value to the practice. Delegating order entry to medical assistants means that physicians and nurses can spend more time with patients and can be assured that a qualified professional will see that orders are entered properly. This transfer of duties not only helps the office meet its meaningful use core measure goals, but it also translates to a more efficient and cost-effective office operation.

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