It’s time to move IT integration to the head of the class. Numerous forces, including value-based care, a steady stream of costly mandates, like ICD-10, and the increasing variability in payer processes and payments, are reshaping the healthcare information landscape. As these trends evolve, there is great value in having an information system with the flexibility to integrate, organize and react to any type of data, whether or not it is the industry standard. How does this happen? Hospitals will have to develop sophisticated integration engines within their health information systems.

Up until now, the focus on integration has been targeted to integration between clinical applications and the health information system. But, it is critical to approach integration on a much broader scale. True integration happens when all technology systems, including clinical and financial, are connected. The result: The hospital or provider organization is able to pull clinical information, such as medical records and charge data, through a strong integration platform to the revenue cycle system.

Do You Know if Your System Is Fully Integrated?

Many hospitals believe their outsourced A/R is already integrated but don’t have real proof. The truth is most IT systems are a patchwork of bolt-on applications, and integration often happens in the background and no one thinks about it until it breaks. All too often, there is a black box that limits visibility into key transactions occurring between systems.

But this scenario can and is changing. As Healthcare IT enters a new era, advanced technology, strategies and partnerships are enabling organizations to create seamless integration across systems. There are many ways to integrate business and clinical applications. A successful approach involves interfacing through an existing HIS system. This allows all clinical systems (including lab, radiology, pharmacy and admissions), as well as outside payer systems, to integrate fluidly with one patient accounting/accounts receivable system.
Four Reasons to Integrate Now

Creating a new integration model brings multiple benefits, including reduced costs, greater data accuracy, higher reimbursement and a simpler IT operation. Not only that, having a high level of integration also nicely positions hospitals to enter the next frontier in integration: building data hubs that will perform enterprise-wide analyses. Here’s what can happen when you maximize technology integration.

1. **Gain real control of your data.** In a highly integrated, transparent IT system, there are processes in place that account for every single data element. There’s no guesswork on whether or not information made it to its ultimate destinations, because there are 24/7 alerting and monitoring processes that allow you to see 30, 60 and 90-day trends and respond to problems right away. Likewise, robust auditing and reconciliation capabilities enable your organization to reconcile and process the number of charges, medical records information points and admissions information points to quickly and efficiently generate a claim.

2. ** Garner business intelligence sooner.** Capturing “big data” is becoming increasingly important for hospitals. Getting there requires a new level of IT integration. Most hospital financial systems work well. They have good client workflow with built-in standard operating procedures that tell us what to do at every step along the revenue cycle, from processing a claim to handling denials and getting paid. While all of this is important, the fact remains that technology systems are static. In other words, hospitals aren’t capturing all of the data they can from their systems.

Moreover, trends are typically detected over a long period of time. Most healthcare organizations wait two-to-three days after a transaction arrives at the patient accounting system before deciding if the claim is held or if it goes out the door. With the help of top-of-the-line integration, we are moving into a space that will allow us to be more dynamic in how staff works a claim. For example, we will be able to extract key data earlier in the patient encounter, enabling us to react to issues right away, and more quickly and accurately predict when a claim will be paid.

3. **Manage payers more effectively.** With the right integration platform and strategy, hospitals are poised to deal more effectively with the extreme variability that comes from integrating payments from hundreds of payers with hundreds of methodologies. This in turn helps hospitals deal more effectively with new payer relationships. The end result for the hospital is each payer payment is understood by the A/R system.

4. **Reduce your technology footprint.** Achieving new levels of integration cuts down on the time and resources needed to gather and process key data. Organizations will no longer have to make huge investments at every endpoint in their health information system. For example, instead of meeting regularly to discuss how to implement changes or a standard operating procedure within the technology and at the staff level, organizations can make them more dynamically by implementing new business rules inside the integration layer of their information systems.

As we ready our organizations for a future of more reform, a move toward bundled payments and tighter connectivity along the healthcare continuum, it makes a lot of sense to start integrating now to create that magic in the middle, which will transform both your data and your revenue cycle operation.