

The Calm After the Storm

When hurricanes hit, cloud-based and mobile platforms enable medical groups to maintain provision of services.

By Naveen Sarabu

On August 25, 2017, a monster hurricane, Harvey, made landfall on the central Texas coast. As the storm moved inland, it dumped more than 40 inches of rain in less than 48 hours on some areas, causing historic flooding. The epic storm crippled hundreds of square miles, leading to a widespread loss of electricity and water services. Less than a week later, Hurricane Irma formed as the most intense Atlantic Hurricane since Katrina in 2005. Extreme winds and storm surges left more than one million homes in Florida without power, an all-too-familiar occurrence for the state that had been hit brutally by Hurricanes Hermine and Matthew just last year.

As these disasters ran their course and residents required medical care, physicians desperately tried to meet that demand. Those enabled with cloud-based and mobile technology were able to support their patients.

Navigating the Waters

These natural disasters caused many Americans to overcome challenges outside their realm of comprehension. Many lacked basic necessities like food, water, and medical care. In the immediate days and weeks following, it was vital for hospitals and physician practices to provide the services needed to support their communities. Even though many practices lost power and required boat evacuations, some physicians performed critical tasks such as refilling prescriptions, reading lab results, reviewing patient files, and rescheduling appointments with only cellular service to aid them. Some continued to see patients via telemedicine apps, allowing them to help those who were most in need while documenting all services accurately.

Physician practices that are still using server-based technology to manage patient information and workflow are unable to access vital patient information when the power is out. These groups are completely shut down as a result of the infrastructure damage that surrounds them and cannot execute the proactive measures required to deliver patient services.

Calling the Cloud—Any Time, Any Place

Physician “mobility,” allowing providers to work from several practice locations or a home office, is achieved through investment in cloud-based technology. Mobile platforms add flexibility through access via a phone or tablet from a hospital, during travel, or—as during a hurricane—wherever you can find a dry spot.

A key feature of a cloud-based platform is the integration of practice and electronic health record (EHR) management, telemedicine facilitation, and patient support so the workflow is seamless regardless of the user’s physical location. A single cloud solution can serve multiple environments so that remote access team members are connected to medical billing, scheduling, and revenue cycle management systems, improving

the provision of medical services while eliminating the hidden costs of client-server software ownership. There is no software to download or hardware to install, and IT staff is not needed to set up, test, or maintain hardware or software. With cloud-based practice management and EHR systems, practices benefit from economy of scale. Because many providers use the same system, redundant costs are minimized or eliminated.

By charting key information in a cloud-based system, users refer to charts and data from a secure single sign-on. When patient information is stored in a secure site, with EHR and practice management records located in one accessible database with one online application, multiple roles in several practices—the physician, nurse, office manager and biller—can all work with the same data at the same time. This improves process efficiency and data accuracy. Copy-and-paste errors typical with practices running separate practice



management and EHR systems are eliminated. When everything works together seamlessly, providers can focus on patient care during standard daily operations, emergency situations, or regional disasters.

Hurricane Harvey heavily impacted residents and health systems in Port Arthur, Texas.

In the days following Hurricane Harvey, Daisy Arco, M.D., who practices family medicine at Fannett Medical Center in Beaumont, Texas, traveled around her region to deliver fresh drinking water. Even without power, she was able to reschedule patients in the days that followed, ultimately re-opening the office once power was restored.

“I’m very grateful [our system] is cloud-based so that I could access patient records from my home to reschedule appointments and send prescriptions,” Dr. Arco says. “Our biller continued working from home, even though she wasn’t able to get to her office. Ultimately, AdvancedMD [an ambulatory healthcare technology company] helped us to re-open much sooner.”

Practicing Without Boundaries

Mobile platforms add another layer of flexibility demanded by today’s lifestyle. Being in constant communication with the main office without being tethered to a set location benefits both the physician seeking work-life balance and patients seeking immediate attention to their needs. It is absolutely vital during natural disasters.

Nichole Tomjanovich, M.D., P.A., a physician-psychiatrist in Houston, Texas, was able to help patients navigate the chaos that followed Harvey, even following a boat evacuation from her home. The physician was able to send prescriptions through her iPhone app.

“It was very helpful to have the cloud-based platform because I could log in to work and access all patient records from wherever I was. Even though the streets were flooded, I met with a client via a telemedicine app,” Dr. Tomjanovich said.

Physicians can access clinical records and schedules, manage messages, create and review charge slips, and view and add patient data on tablets and phones. Interfaces are optimized for mobile devices, where appointments can be color coded, viewable by day, week, or month, with viewer-friendly details and patient records. Physicians can review patient demographics, medical histories, medications, problems, or allergies, labs, medical images, and annotations on their mobile devices. So, even during a disaster, physicians can easily document all their activities while working, which means charges are not lost and billing continues even when the lights are out.

Patient-Facing Payoff

Lee Sandlin, CEO of NanoHealth Associates, operates two clinics and a billing company in Miami Beach and Hollywood, Florida. During the aftermath of Hurricane Irma, despite flood conditions and total power loss, NanoHealth kept vital services going for their patients. Providers used mobile apps on their phones to initially reschedule patients and also to pull reports, view patient files, fax prescription refills, check insurances, order tests, and counsel patients via telemedicine apps.

“We really appreciate that AdvancedEHR [AdvancedMD’s EHR software] is integrated within telemedicine. It has made it much easier on our doctors and staff,” Sandlin says.

Telemedicine integration delivers direct patient-to-physician interfacing regardless of geography. Through secure remote technology, practices can offer uniform, quality patient care via two-way video and secure electronic communications. With video conferencing, physicians can communicate with patients through the portal, review test results, remotely monitor vital signs, and transmit static images. During the virtual visit, the physician can recommend measures to improve unsatisfactory labs or test results, which can be easily documented in the EHR. This type of care provision during challenging circumstances—or where distance simply separates physician and



Apps like AdvancedMD’s AdvancedEHR can help physicians maintain access to medical records when local servers become unavailable.

patient—fosters a collaborative patient experience with no added overhead.

Not If, but When

Integrated workflow automation as described above is not a matter of *if* but *when* in today’s healthcare system. For David Haile, D.P.M., a podiatrist who has practiced in Sebastian, Florida, for over 25 years, this evolution has culminated in the near-complete removal of paper charts, as well as frequent patient engagement with the portal for check-in and other functions. The practice has experienced a substantial workflow benefit in the form of decreased throughput times and fast billing.

“There used to be a week’s lag before what I did on Friday was coded and submitted to insurance,” Dr. Haile recalls. “Today, I do my orders and documentations between cases so before the end of the day, nothing is left on my plate. I get everything done in real time and have complete control over the billing process.”

Achieving integrated workflow automation is a strategic initiative that puts a practice in a proactive position, whether it be during day-to-day operations or during a natural disaster. As we’ve seen in Texas, Florida, and Puerto Rico, an adverse event, bringing with it devastating effects, could be right around the corner. Patients often feel helpless and without support. This is the time for the medical community to take initiative and use the technology at our disposal to help patients stay grounded—whenever and wherever it’s needed. [GPJ](#)

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