BROWN CLINIC – WATERTOWN, SOUTH DAKOTA

USING THE ENTIRE TOOLKIT TO IMPROVE PATIENT CARE

improving healthcare together

The Challenge

Brown Clinic, a long-established, independent clinic serving more than 100,000 patients in rural South Dakota, recognized that their practice needed to continue to innovate and evolve to meet emerging challenges in healthcare — from seeking recognition as a Patient-Centered Medical Home to embracing the Chronic Care Management program to becoming an ACO in order to better adapt to value-based medicine.

The Solution

After transitioning to Electronic Health Records with eClinicalWorks, Brown Clinic recognized their best strategy was to embrace all the tools available to them in a comprehensive healthcare IT system. They undertook a vigorous training program to develop "superuser" capabilities on both the IT and clinical sides of the practice, while building a strong relationship with their Strategic Account Manager at eClinicalWorks.

The Results

Thanks to their strong partnership with eClinicalWorks, and their decision to implement as many of the EHR tools as possible, Brown Clinic has made a successful transition to an Accountable Care Organization, retaining their independence, meeting numerous reporting requirements, continuing to provide quality healthcare, and controlling costs.

eClinicalWorks

Brown Clinic
EHR Superusers on the Great Plains

Rural Roots and a Tradition of Independence

At its founding in Watertown, South Dakota by Dr. H. Russell Brown in 1935, Brown Clinic had one physician, one nurse, and three rooms. Along with much of the Midwest, Watertown and South Dakota were enduring hard times, from the Dust Bowl years to the hardships of the Great Depression. Its population would decline 7% during the decade.

But where others might have seen empty horizons, Dr. Brown saw limitless possibilities. The primary care clinic he founded more than 80 years ago grew along with the town and the state. Slowly and steadily, Brown Clinic put down roots, adapted to the many changes in healthcare over the decades, and established itself as an integral part of the Watertown community, and a valuable resource for thousands of South Dakotans.

The spirit of endurance and independence that marks the clinic's history continues today. Brown Clinic now has 19 physicians, seven non-physician clinicians, two locations, and more than 100 employees. While primary care remains a major focus of the practice, the clinic today offers much more, including internal medicine, geriatrics, pediatrics, surgery, obstetrics and gynecology, podiatry, and its own laboratory and radiology services.

Pioneers on the Great Plains

The most characteristic aspect of Brown Clinic, however, has nothing directly to do with x-rays, lab tests, or the menu of services it can offer. Rather, it is a spirit of openness to change, an ability to remain flexible and nimble in adapting to today's rapidly shifting healthcare landscape.

At Brown Clinic, the spirit of the American pioneers is alive and well.

It is not surprising, then, that Brown Clinic has made the very most of its healthcare IT resources. After transitioning to Electronic Health Records with eClinicalWorks, Brown Clinic recognized their best strategy was to embrace all the tools available to them in a comprehensive healthcare IT system. They undertook a vigorous training program to develop "superuser" capabilities on both the IT and clinical sides of the practice, while building a strong relationship with their Strategic Account Manager at eClinicalWorks.

"EMRs aren't one-size-fits-all like they were 10 or 15 years ago," said Steve Kurban, director of Revenue Cycle and Information Management. "Nowadays, you walk in and open up this toolbox and you've got all these new shiny little tools in there, and you're like, this is going to be fun, where do I start? Which tool do I pick up to begin with?"

The Superuser Decision

Faced with so many tools and possibilities, many practices would choose to start small, learning one part of the system at a time. Change is never easy, after all, and technology can be particularly daunting.

Brown Clinic had a different idea.

"We chose to just jump in and do the whole thing," Kurban said, "and I think that helped force us to learn quicker."

His colleague, Jen Davis, agreed that creating superusers was the right choice, although not an easy goal to achieve.

"A superuser is somebody that is generalized in knowing how the entire facility works," Davis said. "You can't know just one little piece of how the facility works. You have to know how it's going to interact with the different pieces of the software. You also have to know a little bit about the medical side and a little bit about billing in order to make it all work together."

Kurban and Davis work closely together to bridge the gap between the IT and clinical sides of the practice. And with each new challenge that Brown Clinic has faced, the values of in-depth knowledge and independent governance have shown through.

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WHAT IS A PATIENT-CENTERED MEDICAL HOME (PCMH)?

It's not a place... It's a partnership with your primary care provider.

Care that is truly patient centered considers patients' cultural traditions, their personal preferences and values, their family situations, and their lifestyles. It makes the patient an integral part of the care team who collaborates with care providers in making clinical decisions. Patient-centered care puts responsibility for important aspects of self-care and monitoring in patients' hands — along with the tools and support they need to carry out that responsibility.

PCMH puts you at the center of your care, working with your healthcare team to create a personalized plan for reaching your goals.

Your primary care team is focused on getting to know you and earning your trust. They care about you while caring for you.

Technology makes it easy to get healthcare when and how you need it. You can reach your doctor through email, video chat, or after-hour phone calls. Mobile apps and electronic resources help you stay on top of your health and medical history.

Studies show that PCMH:

PROVIDES BETTER SUPPORT AND COMMUNICATION

CREATES STRONGER RELATIONSHIPS WITH YOUR PROVIDERS

SAVES TIME AND MONEY

THE PATIENT-CENTERED HEALTHCARE JOURNEY CAN TAKE US TO MANY DIFFERENT PLACES

BEHAVIORAL & MENTAL HEALTH

HOSPITAL

SPECIALISTS

PRIMARY CARE

PHARMACY

COMMUNITY SUPPORT

Source: Patient-Centered Primary Care Collaborative

Transforming a Practice with 10e

When he arrived at Brown Clinic four years ago, Kurban said, staff needed to invest hours in auditing charts and releasing information to other providers, including the local hospital. Brown Clinic personnel actually went to the hospital, gave them access to eClinicalWorks, and taught hospital staff how to load clients and software on a PC.

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"Now that's a thing of the past. 10e has made it much easier, and their staff like it a lot more, too," Kurban said. "And we can do the same thing with some of our payers. We've given them similar access to do chart audits. It makes sense that if we're all about patient care, and we're taking care of the same population of patients, why wouldn't we share that information? The whole tenet of sharing information across the networks, like Carequality and CommonWell, is designed to do just that. Health Information Exchange? Same thing. We're all about sharing information, to continue that quality and continuity of care."

Gaining PCMH Level 3 Recognition

With the right EHR in place, Brown Clinic has achieved a series of important goals. The first of those, in 2014, was the decision to pursue recognition from the National Committee for Quality Assurance as a Level 3 Patient-Centered Medical Home.

eClinicalWorks supported Brown Clinic throughout the PCMH process, helping them establish reporting procedures that would prove useful in meeting later challenges.

After a year of work, Brown Clinic had achieved PCMH Level 3 recognition in accordance with NCQA's 2014 standards, and had even adjusted to a change in those standards in the middle of the process, another tribute to their flexibility as an organization.

The Top 10

AMERICA BY THE NUMBERS: Among the 10 most common chronic conditions, the prevalence of multiple conditions is high, with over two-thirds of Americans 65 and older having two or more chronic conditions and 14% having six or more chronic conditions.

Hypertension
58%

High Cholesterol
47%

Arthritis
31%

Heart Disease
29%

Diabetes
27%

Kidney Disease
18%

Heart Failure
14%

Depression
14%

Alzheimer's/Dementia
11%

COPD
11%

SOURCE: Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS). https://www.cms.gov

"Developing procedures and policies and documentation requirements to meet PCMH certification requirements was helpful in the mindset of the organization," Kurban said. "The ownership decided they wanted to become PCMH certified, so that was our goal. *How* we got there absolutely depended upon our staff, and they did a wonderful job."

Embracing Chronic Care Management

In 2015, the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services initiated the Chronic Care Management program to recognize and reimburse the non-face-to-face care that so many practices must provide to meet the medical needs of patients with multiple chronic health conditions.

Brown Clinic immediately began working on ways to achieve the goals of the CCM program, even before eClinicalWorks had created a CCM module for its clients. The clinic had experience because the South Dakota Medicaid Health Home Program requires extensive reporting. Kurban says that the clinic hired case manager nurses and a director of Patient Engagement, then adapted its existing reporting models to fit the CCM requirements. The arrival of eClinicalWorks' CCM solution then made their work that much easier.

"The adoption of it has taken a little while," Kurban acknowledged. "It's a different mindset. Reaching out and getting ahold of a patient to come in to take care of things that are going to keep them from coming in is a little weird! But that's the whole focus — prevention, and getting people more wellness minded."

Joining an ACO, Seeking Innovations

Then, in 2016, the clinic's leadership responded to the shift toward value-based reimbursement models by deciding to join AccoCare, a physician-led Accountable Care Organization based in Sioux Falls. Once again, Kurban, Davis, and the rest of the staff needed to put their expertise and nimbleness to work.
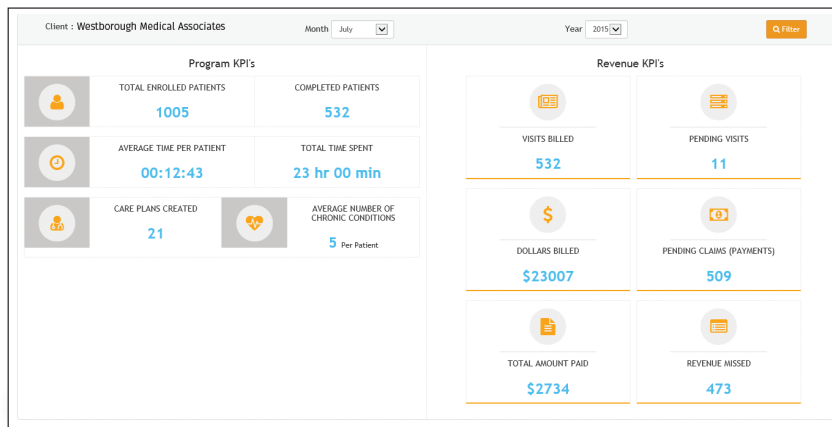
The eClinicalWorks CCM Dashboard. The Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS) recognizes Chronic Care Management (CCM) as a critical component of primary care that contributes to better health and care for individuals.

In 2015, Medicare began paying separately under the Medicare Physician Fee Schedule (PFS) for CCM services furnished to Medicare patients with multiple chronic conditions.

"Prior to the ACO, we used eClinicalWorks for PQRS reporting and Meaningful Use reporting," Kurban said, "and so we were very comfortable with mining data out of the system to meet requirements. And then, PCMH certification had brought about a process mindset to documentation, and some standardization. All of those pieces come together nicely when it comes to rolling out the ACO. So it was comfortable for us. We're now in our second year. We have to demonstrate some savings, but I'm confident that we're going to do that."

Kurban acknowledged there's an old-fashioned flavor to the care offered at Brown Clinic, a sense of community and caring that the practice wants to preserve. At the same time, they recognize that healthcare consumers today — even in rural South Dakota — have choices. Practices need to adapt to change or risk losing patients.

That's why, Davis said, the clinic is rolling out the healow Mom app for expectant mothers, has used Messenger for health campaigns, increasingly encourages the use of Patient Portal, and is marketing the practice with videos and a social media presence.

Brown Clinic is also placing new emphasis on cost estimates, helping project what costs will be so that patients can navigate changes in health insurance and not be hit with unexpectedly high bills.

Lessons to Build Upon

Brown Clinic's achievements are all the more impressive because they were made largely on their own, without formal "superuser" training from eClinicalWorks — although that is a valuable option for practices who want to replicate the success Brown Clinic has enjoyed.

Several key lessons have emerged:

First, Brown Clinic's experience underscores the value of practices working together, sharing information expertise. Kurban said

colleagues in South Dakota and beyond have taken notice of what local governance and IT expertise can produce.

We oftentimes have people come to visit," he said, "and they talk about gaining information to share as far as reporting, nursing homes, skilled nursing facilities and whatnot. And when they come and see what we can do they're just blown away."

That has led Brown Clinic to team with other practices in South Dakota to create a local users group that plans to hold regular meetings to share knowledge and experiences regarding healthcare IT.

Second, confidence builds upon itself. Beyond today's challenges and those on the near horizon, physicians and staff at Brown Clinic are confident that they can handle almost *any* challenge that may come their way.

"We laugh sometimes when we're having calls with eClinicalWorks," Kurban said, "because they're like, you guys at Brown Clinic, you use almost the whole system! And yeah, if there's a module, we pretty much have it turned on. Because each and every piece will help you. One part might help another part, and you just don't know it until you try it."

A Bit of Healthcare IT Wisdom

Finally, the knowledge that Brown Clinic has accumulated is really more than the sum of its parts. It amounts to a measure of healthcare IT *wisdom.*

"In healthcare for some reason we get stuck on how we've been doing it forever, and we want to make that new tool work with our old way, and it *doesn't* work like that all the time," Kurban said. "So to me it's a matter of don't be afraid of the technology, be open-minded and embrace what you can do. Let's work through it together."

Lots has changed since 1935, in healthcare, in South Dakota, and across the nation. But the can-do spirit and adaptability on display at Brown Clinic today has never gone out of style.

"Our goal is to make this the place that people and their families come to, today and down the road," Kurban said. "We have a lot of long-established families that come to Brown Clinic, and it has quite a history here in the Watertown community and in South Dakota." ∎

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