

Fully-integrated a virt

Operating behind the façade of every practice are the communication channels connecting your staff, equipment and suppliers. **Gary Oshry** investigates

If you're like me, you agree that talk of information technology should be restricted to computer swap meets and Star Wars conventions. Discussing how to make your life easier and keep your practice running like a well-oiled machine is far more interesting.

The benefits to your practice of using the latest technology to implement a fully-integrated paperless system are three-fold.

Business

Integrating various facets of your practice such as appointment scheduling, eye examinations, instrument test results, lens ordering, health fund claiming and diagnostic imaging can vastly improve the efficiency and profitability of your business.

Staff

Having instant access to up-to-date

information from anywhere in the practice and streamlining communication with suppliers and medical practitioners will save your staff time and enhance the provision of patient service.

Management

Being able to generate reports on sales figures, patient demographics, product orders and stock allocations can lead to better decision-making. You can work with your PMS provider to customise management reports to reflect the key performance indices of your business.

Strategy

To find the optimal data integration solution for your practice you need a co-ordinated strategy. John Perkins from Bluewave outlines four steps to put you on the right track.

1. Choose a practice management software

(PMS) that offers all the functionality you require and can be linked with other practice equipment in your reception, laboratory, and testing and consulting rooms.

2. Consider your infrastructure requirements such as hardware, network cabling and internet access. A computer network supplier can help you ensure your equipment integration requirements are met.

3. Plan your practice workflow by analysing all the processes involved in running the business and then see how each process links back to your PMS via the computer network. Documenting functions such as lens ordering systems and tracers, scanning referral letters, HICAPS, generating visual fields test results and retinal photographs, and printing recall letters will form the foundation to your overall integration plan.

If you operate a multi-site group of practices, decide which functions need to be integrated and which you would like kept site-specific.

4. Once your computer network and PMS are in place, prioritise each aspect of the overall integration strategy based on the influence it will have on the practice workflow. You can then work towards completing each stage, step by step, with the various equipment suppliers.

Terminal server

If you are operating more than four computers, consider running your PMS through a terminal server. As most software programs are developed primarily to run on the Windows operating system, a Microsoft network will offer the most flexibility and reliability.

Adelaide optometrist **Ian Bluntish** says that upgrading from a PC to a terminal server with an uninterruptable power supply has given his practice greater security and back-up capabilities. 'We use a RAID mirror hard drive so if the main drive dies all the information can still be accessed, and on a nightly basis we run a small back-up of critical information to a cloud site,' he said.

All of Bluntish's clinical records are incorporated into his PMS. Retinal camera and



Adelaide optometrist Ian Bluntish

practice real possibility



Medmont perimeter results, emailed referral letters and contact lens orders are all linked directly to the patient's electronic files, together with scanned hard copies of past patient history documents.

All information can be password protected and accessed through the terminal server from anywhere in the practice. Being able to log into the network remotely also gives Bluntish flexibility to work from home or when travelling.

Integrating your PMS with accounting software can also save you time and reduce errors from double-handling. 'In the past we entered stock purchases into Optomate and then again into MYOB for accounting purposes,' said Bluntish. 'Now we use a program called AusBiz that links the two programs. MYOB then enables us to do all our BASS reports and we use the ATO's AUSkey facility to electronically submit information directly to the taxation office. There is no paperwork involved.'

It is important for the technology in your practice to be kept up to date to ensure compatibility with new equipment and related software, and periodically maintained by a computer technician. 'Just like any technology, computer networks within the practice become unreliable and slower over time,' said Perkins. 'Allowances should be made in your budget for scheduled replacements.'

Virtual server

Instead of hosting your PMS on your local network, for a monthly access fee you can hire a dedicated server located at a purpose-built data-centre (often referred to as using 'cloud' services). This frees you from the responsibility of maintaining and replacing

your hardware and operating systems as well as managing data back-up and security.

Using a virtual server can be an attractive option, particularly for multi-practice groups. A pay-by-the-month virtual server will offer all the benefits of accessing a single patient database including accessibility of patient files from all practices, centralised stock control and appointment scheduling, and ease of reporting.

A virtual server is better for the environment than running your own server in-house and is accessible from mini-PC access points. Also known as 'thin client' or 'dumb termi-

nal', a mini-PC access point is a small network device that allows you to use programs installed on the server just like a normal PC except without the messy wiring. Unlike a PC or laptop, mini-PCs cannot operate autonomously from the server, although they are quieter, cheaper, more reliable and much more compact.

Using lower energy mini-PCs instead of on-site servers will reduce your energy costs, says Perkins.

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