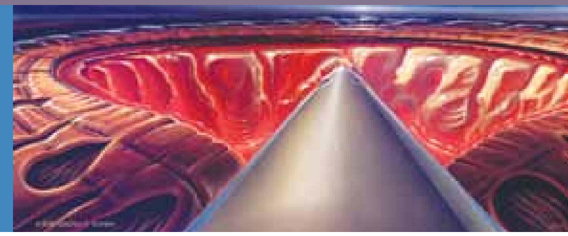
Risk Management Hotline



Tracking Referrals and Test Results

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The OMIC claim discussed in this issue's lead article involved a patient who was never informed of the need for tests. Other claims result from patients who do not follow instructions to see consultants or undergo diagnostic testing. Both scenarios can lead to patient harm and increased liability risk.

Q Whose responsibility is it to order and review tests and disclose the results to the patient?

A This question needs to be explicitly addressed and answered for each patient when more than one physician is involved. If you want to have the results of tests in hand when you first examine the patient, consider developing a form to send to the referring physician. Ask the physician to state the reason and urgency of the appointment being requested and to provide the contact and medical information you need to evaluate the patient. Indicate the tests that should be completed before you will see the patient. Clearly state who will order the tests and verify that the patient has completed them: "Please send the patient for the following tests and contact my office when you have received the test results." In some situations, you may not know which tests need to be done until you examine the patient. Tests you choose after examination would normally be tracked by your office.

Q Do you have a system you can recommend to track referrals and tests?

A Yes. When you determine that a patient needs a consultation with a specialist or a diagnostic test, disclose it to the patient, explain the reason for the order, and document your discussion and order. Ask the patient to schedule a follow-up visit or telephone consultation with you before leaving the office so you can review the results and revise the care plan. Next, instruct your staff to enter the information into a tracking system (see sample below). The system can be a follow-up tracking form, logbook, card file, or spreadsheet on the computer. When the report arrives, instruct staff to attach it to the patient's file and place on your desk for your review. Date and sign the report, indicate any follow-up needed, and place in the medical record. Disclose the results to the patient and document the discussion. Communicate and document the new treatment plan. Update the tracking form.

Q What steps do I need to take to ensure that I get the report?

A There are two ways to ensure that patients obtain the requested tests/consultations and you receive a report. First, assign to a reliable staff member the responsibility of reviewing the tracking system on a regular basis. Second, ask staff as part of preparing records for the next day's patients to review each file to see if any report or result is expected. If the report is not received in the usual time, ask staff to call for results. If you learn that the patient did not present for the test or consultation, ask staff to contact the patient to learn why. Be sure to question patients in a non-judgmental manner: "We called to get the results of your MRI and were told that you had cancelled it. Was there some kind of problem? Could you tell me why you didn't have this done?"

Q What if patients refuse the recommended care?

A Clarify why the patient is not complying with treatment recommendations. Possible reasons for not scheduling tests or procedures may include financial difficulties, HMO authorization problems, transportation difficulties, child care problems, confusion about the disease or the need for treatment, or fear of the significance of the results of the test, procedure, or consultation. Next, educate the patient about the disease process, treatment recommendations, and consequences of non-compliance. Target the education to the reasons for non-compliance. When possible, identify social service resources that may help. For example, some pharmaceutical companies provide free or reduced-cost medications. Be familiar with the enrollment criteria and process for state and federal assistance, and of transportation services for patients. If treatment is not authorized by the patient's HMO, act as a patient advocate and appeal the decision. Verify that the patient understands the points being made by asking the patient to explain them back to you in his or her own words. Give written materials whenever possible, and use visual teaching aids, such as videos, charts, diagrams, and models of the eye. If your efforts to educate and clarify the need for treatment are not effective, you may need to terminate the relationship (see "Noncompliance" and "Termination of the Physician-Patient Relationship" at www.omic.com).

SAMPLE PATIENT TRACKING SYSTEM

PATIENT	TEST PROBLEM PROCEDURE REFERRAL	DATE ORDERED	DATE OF RESULTS	FOLLOW-UP NEEDED	DATE COMPLETED
Kim Garcia	To Dr. Allen	10/1	10/7	Call patient: appointment	10/8
Bob Pearce	MRI	10/3	10/20	To Dr. Hall	10/21