✳ Backline®

Critical Access Hospital Uses Secure Messaging to Enhance Patient Safety

Ringgold Implements Backline® to Facilitate Secure Communication of Patient Health Information and Ensure HIPAA Compliance

Case Study

16-Bed Critical Access Hospital | Mt. Ayr, Iowa | HIS: McKesson Paragon

Text messaging is synonymous with convenience—so much so that more than 80% of Americans rely on the platform daily, according to Pew Research. For providers, there is a real temptation to solve healthcare delivery problems using tools that are ready in hand. Administrators at Ringgold County Hospital in Mt. Ayr, Iowa, often worried that physicians and staff would use texts to share patient updates, seek quick consults, or ask patient-related questions.

"There were instances where people wanted to send messages with images of things like patient wounds in order to obtain a second opinion," said Ringgold's Director of Health Information Systems, Carrie Main. "Unfortunately, we couldn't authorize that practice because it is not HIPAA-compliant, and we would have no way of knowing if these images were being uploaded from personal devices and into the cloud. As a leading healthcare organization, we believe it is essential to safeguard patient privacy, while also recognizing the need to provide clinicians better communication tools to do their jobs."

Administrators worried that patient health information could be inadvertently disclosed, which would violate HIPAA regulations. Text messaging might be a quick way to communicate, but could patient identities remain concealed if staff sent vague texts about "the ER patient who had stomach pain" or "the lady who had knee surgery?" Also, if staff only vaguely identified patients, how could this communication become part of the patient record?

Ringgold leaders reached out to DrFirst, seeking a solution to meet the need for swift, text-based communication without compromising HIPAA. They sought a platform that was simple to implement, easy to use, and supported by a company with a proven history of success. Other requirements included affordability and the ability to integrate easily with the hospital's McKesson Paragon health information system.

"We looked at products from different vendors and ended up selecting DrFirst's Backline® solution, which offered quick training, simple navigation, and a user-friendly interface," explained Main. "We also liked that we could use Backline to send secure messages to people even if they weren't on the Backline platform, and that it integrated with the Paragon system."

Backline is a secure messaging solution built specifically for healthcare and meets all HIPAA, HITECH Act, and Joint Commission requirements. Backline supports private chat between individuals, as well as group or patient-centered chats, and connects providers in real-time to support care in progress, regardless of the user's location.

Ringgold implemented Backline across the organization and in every department. To encourage wider adoption among staff, the hospital created several use cases that enhanced communication and facilitated the care process. For example, lab results can now be electronically interfaced directly to clinicians as soon as preliminary culture results are available.

"Often when a patient is being treated on a new antibiotic, physicians will have lab tests done to determine if the prescribed medication is working or if an alternate antibiotic should be prescribed," said Main. "When preliminary culture results become available, the pharmacy is immediately advised. If a doctor needs to be notified, pharmacists use Backline, which results in having the right antibiotic administered to the patient sooner."

Ringgold also relies on its secure messaging platform to route orders for dietary, respiratory, and other therapies. All messages sent though this system are time-stamped and can be extracted and made part of the patient medical record. An audit trail is maintained that can be easily searched, retained, and archived.

The secure messaging platform also contributes to enhanced patient safety and better care delivery.

"We had one patient who arrived in the ER with a broken hip," said Main. "We took x-rays and then transferred her to another facility for surgery. The patient was sent with a CD of her x-ray images, but for some reason, the other facility could not access it. Fortunately, we were able to use Backline to take photos of the x-rays and forward them to the specialist, who was still able to communicate even though he was not a current user of Backline. This saved the patient from being exposed to radiation for repeat x-rays. Additionally, this allowed her to receive pain medications and treatment more quickly."

Backline provides the organization with a secure, user-friendly communications solution that supports text messaging along with the sharing of images and other attachments. Patient care is expedited, patients are identified properly, and all communication is tracked and audited.

"We look forward to expanding our use of Backline in the future," said Main. "We've already experienced a positive impact on the coordination of patient care through improved communications, and we expect that increased utilization by staff will drive even better patient outcomes."

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– Carrie Main, Director of Health Information Systems at Ringgold County Hospital

DRFIRST 12/2019