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Best Practice: Industry Management in Oncology during a Pandemic

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The current pandemic has affected every sector of healthcare. The practice of oncology in particular has been turned on its head by COVID-19. Even prior to the pandemic, there were serious concerns from experts in the field, ranging from a chronic shortage of patient access, to care in rural areas and declining reimbursement, to the financial burden placed on patients and associated payer pressures around prior authorization. The pandemic has put a spotlight on these past operational and financial issues, thereby forcing cancer centers to examine processes and become more operationally efficient in order to survive in our nation's new normal.

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As we learn to navigate the new environment of COVID-19, oncology professionals must create new, flexible workflows. Attention should be focused on improving patient care, including how to best access and leverage life science experts. The pandemic has brought us new tools to increase efficiency and patient convenience such as telemedicine visits for follow up, heightened awareness of infection control measures, and a real need to focus on the efficiency of clinical staff. The administrative burden of managing life science meetings—an issue faced by any medical practice—is especially high in the oncology space, where new drug indications almost always have a role in patient care. While this isn't a new concern, it has become much more urgent for cancer centers to solve in the months since COVID-19.

Pharmaceutical representatives, including front line reps, reimbursement specialists, key account managers or medical science liaisons, have gone through welcome and unwelcome visits to cancer centers. The truth of the matter is that the patient is the ultimate vested interest. As such, we must objectively measure the value that a pharmaceutical representative brings to the patient-centric practice and trust that the providers are acting in the best interest of the patient and not abusing drug utilization, resulting from rep meetings. The education that a pharmaceutical representative brings to a treatment facility is essential for staying on the cutting edge of patient care. The amount of available chemo drugs, therapeutics and indications are enormous compared to just 10 years ago and exponentially different than 20 years ago. It's, almost impossible for a provider to remain current on newly approved drugs and indications for all the disease types in a practice without assistance from experts in the pharma field.

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improve clinical outcomes. The reality of the situation is that the reps can and do affect your financials as well as those of the patient. Almost every drug manufacturer has copay and coinsurance assistance and in cases of documented financial need, even provide free drug replacement. Our cancer centers and their patients will only have access to assistance when they are made aware of the option. Drug reps share data on payer policies, Medicare coverage and various forms of financial aid to patients. According to a study in Science News "The work found that symptoms of anxiety and alcohol dependence worsened over time for those where struggling to pay bills. Those who were more stressed about debt had worsening levels of stress, anxiety and depression. These sad but real stories can be minimized when we consistently interact with pharmaceutical reps to educate our teams on accss to financial aid.

Handling the logistics of multiple rep visits in the midst of everything else can seem to be just another hurdle. "We've seen a huge shift in this area," says Karen Mattocks, senior vice president of RxVantage business development for oncology practices and providers. "Historically a rep would come in and they would only want to meet the physician, because the physician was the one who made all the decisions." That in itself was "an operational nightmare," she explains, "with the administrative time for booking, confirming, canceling and rescheduling appointments and then the hour the rep would take up during lunch." In today's cancer center, RxVantage helps to streamline the visitation pipeline to the various disciplines in the practice. Each discipline can define the type of reps they want or do not want to see (reimbursement, KAM, MSL, front line, etc.), the frequency and duration of the meetings (daily, weekly, monthly or quarterly) and the

number of times the reps can book per year. These meetings can include in-servicing the infusion team, meetings of the P&T committee to discuss contracts, formularies or new indications, pharmacy updates to review administration and side effects, business office meetings to discuss reimbursement questions and patient assistance programs, coordination of Tumor Boards and so much more. One size does not fit all!

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With the added concerns of Covid-19 and infection control and concerns about keeping vulnerable patients safe, cancer centers need a way to control access to their practice, without cutting themselves off from critical information. "With cancer treatments growing more and more complex," Mattocks explains, "and with the FDA consistently approving new drugs and indications, it is critical for all disciplines in the practice to keep informed. If a practice doesn't have a good way to handle this traffic, it doesn't take long to get bogged down."

A Flexible, Automated Solution

Candice Hulse, Regional Director of New York Cancer & Blood Specialists, spoke recently about the challenges her offices faced as an early epicenter of the pandemic. At the outset, Hulse was able to leverage RxVantage to communicate with her community of life science experts en-masse, alerting them to closures and protocol changes. Additionally, because her offices had used RxVantage to schedule meetings with life science experts, it was a quick fix to cancel and change appointments—a blessing as there were many larger issues her team was able to then focus on regarding day to day operations and patient treatment.

When RxVantage subsequently launched its Virtual Meetings tool in early April, Hulse jumped at the opportunity to be able to continue meeting with life science experts. RxVantage Virtual Meetings was the hassle-free solution she was looking for, allowing her to re-open meetings so her team could receive critical information, resources, and updates.

RxVantage Virtual Meetings provided a simple, flexible tool for her team to use amid COVID-related office closures, saying "our providers really love RxVantage Virtual Meetings, it's so simple to use. It's much more flexible with their schedule."

Hulse has reported in a panel discussion available for view at this **link**, with other provider managers from around the country, that her organization was already experiencing a post-lockdown rush and had adjusted its practice protocols accordingly.



They've extended their open hours, she explained, and they've done things like erect tents in clinic parking lots where patients can get their blood drawn and receive other basic services.

Moving forward, in the age of COVID-19, such accommodations will be increasingly expected, Hulse noted. "It's going to be really interesting to see how this evolves to a new normal. I feel that we may have set a new precedent."

What's more, the platform provides a digital directory of all local reps, complete with contact information and in-app messaging from the rep directory or from the scheduled appointment. Hulse leverages these features to message reps individually or en-masse to communicate new protocols or updated policies, freeing up time and giving her confidence that only authorized personnel will have access to the practice. You can even attach files and links to messages, including sign-in sheets, food orders, policy documents, fundraiser fliers and more.

Over the coming years, Mattocks predicts, cancer treatments will continue to evolve, especially with the advent of new studies underway such as the Abscopal Effect, which is a treatment that focuses radiation oncology on the tumor itself combined with immunotherapy drugs allowing for preservation of more of the immune system by treating a smaller area of the body. Oncology reps will continue to be an important source of education and information for practices on the leading edge of care. "And our goal at Rx-Vantage will remain the same: to streamline the connections between these two groups so everyone can focus on doing what they do best."