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Clinical Trials—A Possible New Business Opportunity



DEERFIELD, IL—The typical way the clinical trial recruitment process unfolds is the trial is announced and advertised, and individuals who believe they might qualify call a phone number to learn more information and perhaps apply. That phone number is often the clinical trial leadership number. And, therein may be the opportunity for healthcare call centers, says Shirley Trainor-Thomas, Senior Vice President, Business Development for the Deerfield, Illinois-based GuideStar Clinical Trials Management.

In some cases, it may be difficult for callers to connect as the research leadership may not always be in their offices. Additionally, in a standard clinical trial recruitment process, there are a lot of calls that turn out not to be successful recruits. Many callers may not pass the first level of questions to become true prospects for the trial. “If

you had the call center do the first line of screening then people doing the research could spend their time on enrolling patients,” she says. “That’s where the revenue comes from.”

It’s revenue in two aspects. The clinical trial sponsor, typically a drug or device company, is paying the hospital a certain fee per patient enrolled for all the “clinical trial” elements of the interaction. Patients may need regular hospital care as well, which can be reimbursed through normal insurance channels.

“Call centers need to be proactive about this,” Trainor-Thomas says. “I’ll bet there aren’t many clinical trial research directors that have even thought about using the call center.”

However, it would be a fairly straightforward activity to add. The clinical trial research team could give the call center a set of criteria to be

used when talking to prospective recruits and the conversations could move through in a decision tree modality. Depending on the accounting system the hospital uses, it may be possible to have a portion of the fee from the clinical trial company transferred to the call center as reimbursement for their participation in the program.

Adding to the potential clinical trial market has been a broadening of where clinical trials are taking place. “Over 20 years ago over 70 percent of sponsored (drug or device company) clinical trials were being done in academic medical centers,” she says. “Today, over 70 percent of sponsored trials are being done in a community hospital setting.” Reasons for this switch include the reduced bureaucracy found in the community hospital and the ability to have a more representative population available for the trials. Trainor-Thomas says that often in the academic medical center environment, many patients have comorbidities that make recruitment more difficult.

Another factor is that clinicians tend to be more available in a community setting versus the academic world where faculty are dividing their days among teaching, research, and seeing patients.

One positive benefit for community hospital involvement in clinical trials is the halo effect it can have in its marketplace. Trainor-Thomas points to a November 2012 study of 1,200 people by Neathawk Dubuque & Packett that indicates that 89 percent of respondents strongly agree or agree with the following:

“I would expect a community hospital sponsoring research programs and clinical trials to be more innovative and possess more advanced technology than the typical hospital.” ■